Kyrie (Requiem I)

Universe SK909HI

Being a member of the Survey Corps was a dangerous profession—arguably the most dangerous within the walls—but it did have its perks, such as your once-hazy fate being set in stone, without you needing to worry about the future (granted, you had a very low chance of ever living to the age of twenty, and, should you get past that point, you would likely be crushed underfoot by Sina nobles in a quest for political pursuit)(Hey, at least crippling student debts were no longer on the stress list)(Even if being eaten alive by naked giants was).

Either way, you were going to die. It was about the only thing set in stone within the Walls.

Something that was not, however, on the list of guaranteed fates for a Scout, was being plucked from your day-to-day routine by some mysterious force and dropped in a strange room with a bunch of other people.

"What the fu—ah, son of a bitch!" Eren winced as he sat up, rubbing his shoulder, where he'd landed particularly hard.

"Nice wording," Reiner groaned, sitting up, forehead red from the impact with the floor. "Where the hell. . ?"

"Gah!" Petra sat up with a jolt, arms flailing, eliciting shouts of reproach as the flapping limbs smacked into several other people. "Where duh teetans?"

"Annie!" Bertolt yelped as the girl sat up straight, head popping up next to his elbow. "Where'd you come from?"

Levi and Mikasa are both already on their feet, muscles tense, eyes scanning the room for an dangers, though Mikasa quickly abandons this task with a small gasp of 'Eren!' as she spotted the brunette Shifter and took off running across the room towards him, only to be halted in her mission as Mike sat up, tripping her and throwing her through the air and crashing into Jean, sending both teens to the ground in a tangle of groaning limbs.

"'S it breakfast?" the mountain of a man smacked his lips a few times before falling backwards, crushing Connie, who'd been about to stand up, beneath his back. "Oi, what's squeaking?"

"Hange?" Moblit looked up, blinking. "Where's your safety blankie? You're not supposed to sleep without—"

Erwin stood up with a frown, straightening his jacket. "Strange," he commented idly.

"You don't say," Ymir muttered, crossing her arms. Erwin shot her a small frown, and she shrugged.

The room was large, about the size of their meeting room, though it was decorated unlike any place Erwin had ever seen. The walls were painted—actually *painted*—a light blue, somewhere between the sky on a spring day and the shade mothers swaddled their babies with in Mitras. A large, plush rug, white as snow and softer than anything any of them had ever felt in their lives, was thrown over the tile floor, and rows upon rows of bookshelves lined the walls, packed to the brim with volumes, both thin and thick, and small, square-headed figurines, shoved into the shelves where there was room. Thick, heavy curtains in a shade of light brown were pulled over a massive window, and a round object hung from the ceiling, glowing with a sort of steady white light, illuminating the walls.

On the other side of the room, there was what seemed to be a kitchen, though it was unlike any that any of them had ever seen—or thought to exist at all. The surfaces seemed to be made of actual *marble*, and the wood of the counters was dark and shining, handles crafted out of real metal. The sink was curved, worlds more sophisticated than their crude water pump, and the stools for the counter island had plush, white *leather* cushions. A white dining table and simple, yet elegant, chairs were off to the side, with a bowl of fruits none of them had ever seen in the centre. But the strangest object was the. . . thing.

It was large, easily a hundred and ten inches, slightly curved, pitch-black, and reflective. It was resting on the far wall, attached halfway up, and, sitting below it, there was a coffee table, though unlike any that any of them had ever seen—rather than being made of wood, the surface seemed to be made of pure *marble*, and the legs were shining beneath the strange lights on the ceiling.

"What *is* that?" Armin spoke, voice low and reverent. "It's—just—this entire place—*wow*."

"I'll second that," Reiner muttered. "Jesus, it's like. . . like. . . I don't even know what it's like."

Sasha had her face buried in one of the couches. "You *need* to feel this!" she gasped. "It's *so soft!* And the *carpet!*" She dropped from the couch, landing face-first in the plush material. "It's like a cloud!"

"Clouds are wet, moron," Ymir sneered.

"Not *this* one!"

Eld and Moblit hovered awkwardly next to the thing on the wall. "What the *hell*, man?" Eld muttered, poking it.

"This is *so weird*," Moblit muttered, running his hands up and down the glossy edges. "Is it just decoration?"

"Maybe it's a shield!" Connie suggested. "Like, a really big, group one!"

"Oh, yeah, probably. Hey, let's take it off the wall and see—"

Everybody jumped as the door slammed open. The older soldiers whirled around, reaching for swords that weren't there, while the cadets settled for letting out undignified squeaks.

"No, I don't fucking *care* if all we've got are interns!" a girl snapped as she stormed into the room, marching towards the bookshelves, a hand held up to her ear, where a small black object was lodged. "Well, then grab someone from a different branch!" she continued as reached up, grabbing a book. "Listen, Tyler, I've had Septimus and Jenna on the waiting list for nearly a month, and the Death Note characters are supposed to be arriving in, like, half an hour—what?" She scowled as she shoved a figurine into the crook of her elbow, arms now piled with books. "What do you *mean* the Winterfell branch can't take the Phantomhives? We've already got, what, more than three universes from them this month? *Well, if the planes are grounded, get them on a train!*" she added, all but screeching the last sentence. Armin winced, covering his ears. "Or, hell, throw all your useless paper-pushers into a new branch! Lord knows we've got enough desk workers!"

"Omni, please, calm down," another person said, following the girl—Omni—into the room, hands held out in front of him in a vain attempt to placate the obviously raging woman. "Tyler's got his own people to manage, and, besides, we still need to clear up the issues with Rift CM844A—"

"Not now, Marco," the girl—Omni—snapped, before returning to her argument with the invisible man—Tyler. "Fine, if Winterfell can't take their people, then have them send over some of their folks—*what the* hell *do you mean, they don't have any available people?* Jesus Freckled Christ, fine! Then call Knowhere, Sha'nequa's available, right? Yeah, I *know* she's on leave right now, but it's not like we have any other fucking choices! We'll give her a pay raise, or someth—" She turned around, and her eyes widened as they fell on the group of soldiers clustered in the corner, staring at her in shock.

"Oh, balls," her companion whispered.

"Tyler?" Omni said, voice shaky. "I'm gonna have to call you back." She pressed the thing in her ear and collapsed onto a couch.

Few people paid her much attention, though with the majority of their gazes fixed on the person standing behind her.

"Marco?!"

Five (very loud, very tearful) minutes later found the soldiers standing in front of Omni, who sat on a couch, massaging her temples, with Marco hovering behind her shoulder (still smiling at his friends).

To say Omni was an interesting specimen would have been a gross understatement—she had pale skin, almost milky white, and small, white freckles that seemed to glow faintly were scattered over her cheekbones in a pattern that almost looked like constellations of stars.

Her hair was short and choppy, some strands pulled into thin braids that were scattered throughout her head, with a few hanging around her face—but that was hardly the most surprising part. The thing that threw the soldiers off the most about her was that her hair was *blue*—a blue the same shade as the sky at twilight. But even that paled in comparison to her eyes.

Her eyes—if that's what they *really* were, were blank, pupilless expanses of the night sky. Twinkling stars surrounded spinning galaxies as they moved around glowing novas, the endless black expanse lit up by the countless meteorites flashing through the darkness.

Simply put, she was a blue-haired weirdo with the universe in her eyes.

"Shit," she said for the fifth time that minute. "Shit, shit, *shit*." Eight time. "Marco, how the hell did they get here? I thought I told you we couldn't pull them in until—"

"It wasn't me!" Marco protested. "Bob sent me a text telling me to get to Room 13 as soon—"

"Bob!" Omni shouted. "Of *course* it was her—shit, we lend her the master key for *one day*, and she makes a million copies, hides them across eighty-seven universes, and starts messing around for fun—"

"Excuse me," Levi interrupted. "But, while watching you two argue has truly been the highlight of my day so far, I think we'd all really appreciate it if you could tell us *what the fuck is going on*. Where—" he gestured at the room at large, "the fuck is this place, who," he pointed at Omni, "the fuck are you, what," he waved his arms at the soldiers, "the fuck are we doing here, and *why*," he pointed at Marco, "is a fucking *dead man* walking around and dressed like a fucking Sina brat—no offense, Freckles."

"None taken, sir."

Omni sighed as she stood up and rubbed the back of her neck. What Levi had said was true: both Marco and Omni were dressed in simple clothes, but of quality none of them had ever seen—the stitching was so straight it might have been done by the Goddesses themselves, and the weave was so tight that it could probably catch water if you held it beneath a spring. There was a *lot* of it, too. Marco was dressed rather simply, but still extravagantly (to them, at least), with a dark green button-up, the Cadet Corps insignia stitched over the breast pocket, open and pulled over a white T-shirt, which, itself, was tucked into a pair of grey jeans, and he wore a pair of military boots over them. Leather bracelets were wrapped around his wrists, and his hair was slightly longer and mussed, as if he'd been running his fingers through it a lot.

Omni, meanwhile, was dressed like. . . well, actually, none of them knew *how* she was dressed, exactly. If they had to describe it, they probably would have compared it to a crossdressing Pastor Nick raiding every jewelry store in Sina. She had on a massive black hoodie, baggy from where it rested over her hips and hands, and a pair of tiny grey shorts, covered in metal studs, over ripped fishnet tights. On her feet, she had black ankle boots with a heel that would have made most noblewomen faint in horror, and, on her left foot, a silver

anklet with a star pendant hanging from it. Her fingers were adorned with countless rings, to the point where it looked like she'd just shoved her fingers into pots of metal, and a thin, silver, chain choker was wrapped around her throat.

"Well, since you're already here, I might as well," she sighed, planting her hands on her hips as she stood in front of them, Marco hovering over her shoulder. "Welcome," she said, lifting chin slightly, "to the Web. My name's Omni, and I'm a god."

It took quite a while for the soldiers to calm down, but, eventually, Erwin raised his hand, quieting the group.

"Miss Omni," he said. "You have to understand, this is quite difficult for us to comprehend—I mean, claiming to be a deity—"

Omni smirked, eyes flashing, and crooked a blue-nailed finger, gesturing Erwin closer. He frowned, leaning forwards slightly, and she stood on her toes to whisper in her ear, just loud enough for the rest of the room to hear.

"810, history class. Do you still think it's worth it?"

Erwin's eyes widened, heart skipping a beat as Marco put his face in his palm with a groan. Mike shot him a glance, eyebrow raised.

"There," she said, crossing her arms smugly. "*Now* will you listen to me?"

Nobody said anything. She sighed. "Good," she said. "Like I said, I'm a god, but not in the traditional sense—I was once just like you, walking around, completely unaware that I had no free will—"

"Excuse me, *what?*"

"—but that all changed when my story ended." She turned back to them. "You see," she said. "You're all just characters—characters in a story created by a man from another world."

"I'm sorry, *what*?" Eren demanded, holding up a hand. "Did I hear you right? Another *world*?"

Omni smirked. "Marco? Curtains, please."

Marco sighed, crossing the room in long strides and yanking open the curtains. Everybody's jaws dropped.

The street outside was nothing like what they were used to—horse-drawn carriages still plodded down the streets, but the street itself was grey cobblestone, nothing like the flat roads at home. The buildings were just as grey, squarish, and fit tightly together as a mix of people dressed in thick finery and simpler garb walked up and down the street. As they watched, a dog bounded across the street towards a small boy, skirting around the ankles of a tall man in a coat and most peculiar hat, holding a pipe, walking side-by-side with a shorter man with a mustache.

"What the *fuck?*" Levi whispered.

"Like I said, different worlds," Omni said. "You've all heard stories before, right?" They nodded. "Well, I'm about to say something very important—imagination has *power*. And that's

not just a cheesy, throwaway line. The human mind is literally the most dangerous weapon of all. You see," she said, holding up a finger. "The Web is a connection of all the different universes created by storytellers in the one main, starting universe—we like to call it the Homepage. It wasn't always like this," she continued. "Starting off, things were simple. A parent would spin together some cock-and-bull to get their kids to sleep, some kids would tell a short tale to their friends, and all that jazz." She waved her hand, bracelets jingling. "But then things got complicated—the stories started getting spread around, gaining meaning, gaining *life*. Suddenly, Peter Pan wasn't just a character, he was a *person*, a role that little boys took on, a role model who wasn't *quite* so fictional anymore." She stood up dramatically, and a few people leaned back. "The more stories there were, the more characters there were, and, when the stories ended, where did they go?" She spread her hands. "Nowhere. It was *chaos*. Once their story was over, they didn't have a meaning anymore. No more reason to live. No plotline to follow. Their universe would cave in on itself, destroying everyone and everything in it. This wouldn't just affect the people *in* the story, no. People from the homepage would realize, too. It would be small for them, comparatively—the acting might suddenly seem a bit dry, the wording would become bland, or maybe the plot that had drawn so many people in suddenly started sounding boring. That's where the Web comes in.

"A few characters managed to escape their universes before they collapsed," she continued. "And where did they end up?"

"Empty space?" Sasha suggested.

"Nuh-uh!" Omni pointed at her, and she jumped. "Nope! They ended up in *other universes*. Discovered new worlds! Of course, some decided to just forget it and try to settle down, but there were a few that managed to meet with characters from other stories. They talked, realized what was happening, and came up with a solution."

"The Web," Erwin said.

"Correct-o, Commander!" Omni proclaimed. "The Web holds all the universes together, keeping them connected to the Homepage, and giving the characters a place to go when their stories end. Once they've reached the end of their plotline, we offer them a choice: stay in their world, or join the Web. I," she said, placing a hand on her chest. "Was a background character, myself, in a webcomic—*Always Human*. I was never given a name, nor a backstory, but I still existed. I had my own story in my own universe. And when the plotline ended, I chose to come here."

"And dead characters, well," Marco gave a humourless laugh, and Annie looked away. "Well, this is where we end up, either way."

Omni nodded. "In the beginning, it was fine," she said. "We offered places for dead characters, or those who had served their purpose, to exist—live—again. But then, a few years ago, things started getting complicated. It started off small. But, eventually, we started realizing what was going on."

“What was it?” Mike asked.

“A combination of a variety of things,” Marco said. “But one of the main factors was fanwork.”

“Fanwork?” Mikasa muttered.

“People on the Homepage began devolping closer bonds with the characters,” Omni said. “Husbandos, waifus, children, stans, et cetera. Picking and choosing their own favourites. For example, from your world, Marco and Levi are quite popular.” She gestured at the two.

“What?” Levi spluttered as Hange began laughing.

“Levi? *Popular?*” They snorted, taking off their glasses to wipe at tears. “Oh, it’s Winterfest!”

“Fans started making their own work,” Omni continued as Moblit and Gunther forcibly separated Levi from Hange. “Fanart, but, also, fanfictions. Adding to the stories after it was already over, or, even worse, while they were ongoing.”

“Their own plotlines began interfering with the original ones,” Armin guessed. “And that caused problems. . ?”

“Bingo.” Marco smiled. “You got it.”

“Well, naturally, this was a problem,” Omni said. “We needed to deal with it, but we couldn’t very well tell them to stop creating their work—it’s quite enjoyable, really. So, we came up with a solution.”

“What was it?” Krista asked.

Omni chuckled. “We decided that the best thing we could do for the characters was to show them their own futures. Show them their destined paths and fates, so that—”

“Wait, wait, *wait!*” Reiner jumped to his feet, slashing his hands through the air. “You’re showing them the *future*?” His eyes were wide, face pale.

Omni’s eyes locked on him, twinkling stars and spinning planets suddenly cold. “And the past.” He stiffened.

“We established branches in tons of different universes,” Marco said, oblivious to the three sinking lower and lower in the back of the group. “That way, we could always get characters in a universe that wasn’t their own, so we wouldn’t affect their plotlines. We’re currently in Victorian-era London, Universe SH87ACD—Sherlock Holmes,” he added, pointing at the tall man and his short friend as they bustled past their window again, this time, headed in the opposite direction. “Our original universe—with the Walls, and stuff—is Universe SK909HI, and was created by a man named Hajime Isayama.”

“Hajime Isayama,” Mikasa muttered. “Isayama. . .” She frowned.

“Sounds kinda like your name,” Jean said.

“The branches can be anywhere,” Omni said. “For example, right now, we’re in an old shoe store that’s been closed for decades. We actually used some TARDIS technology on the

branches after Doctor Who came into play, so each branch can take up to twenty universes—there's even an old shed on Winterfell's grounds that can take twenty-five."

"This is a television," Marco said, pointing at the screen on the wall. "TV, for short. We're going to be using it to show you the past, present, and future episodically. My memory from after the warehouse was wiped," he admitted sheepishly, rubbing the back of his head (Bertolt let out a small sigh of relief). "And I haven't seen it yet, so I'll be sitting in with you." He glanced at Omni, who groaned and rolled her eyes.

"*Fine*," she snapped, flopping down on a loveseat that seemed to have appeared out of nowhere. "Come on, sit down," she said, gesturing at the chairs and couches.

"Damn, this is *nice*," Jean gasped as he sunk down onto a couch next to Marco. Marco beamed at him warmly.

"Ooh!" Hange flopped onto a beanbag chair. "Squishy!"

"Weirdo," Levi grumbled, flopping down on the couch between Erwin and Petra. Mike chuckled, sitting down on the other side of the Commander.

"One more thing," Omni said, and, with a wave of her hand and chorus of screams from Connie and Sasha, plates upon plates of food and drink appeared on the coffee table. Everybody's jaws dropped, none of them having seen so much food in one place at the same time. Omni cackled as they all dove for the table, even the officers abandoning their professional exteriors to fight for the best sandwiches. "I fuckin' love being a god."

And, with that, the first episode of Attack on Titan began.

Opening – 1. Feuerroter Pfeill und Bogen (Guren no Yumiya)

The screen showed an image of a stone wall with a woman's face carved into it. Loud music began to play. "*Sie siend das Essen, und wir siend die Jäger!*"

"Music?" Erwin frowned. "Is this relevant to the episodes?"

Eren furrowed his brow. Something was nagging at the back of his mind. "Is that Wall Maria?"

"Is this from before the fall?" Connie asked.

There was a loud crash and the wall burst into chunks of stone, kicked through by some great force.

"Never mind."

Reiner hid a cough behind his sandwich and Bertolt made a tiny noise into his tea.

An image of a battlefield appeared on screen, gray tinted with red. Bloodstained swords were stuck into the ground, and soldiers were standing around, heads bowed, blades in hand.

"Hey, is that us?" Eren recognized a few silhouettes.

"It is," Armin said. "Annie, Reiner, Bertolt, you're there, too!"

"Nice," Annie said, deliberately looking anywhere but at her donut.

Erwin frowned, noticing the way Omni's gaze never left the three (although it was pretty hard to tell where she was looking, with her eyes being the way they were). "Are they important?" he asked quietly.

Omni glanced at him and shrugged, leaning back in her chair. "You all are, just a little bit."

"*Our names won't be remembered if we die like trampled flowers*." The camera flashed to focus on the blood-splattered faces of Eren, Armin and Mikasa as they stared down at the ground, faces brooding. "*I refuse to be forgotten, written off as less than worthless*."

"Hey, Mikasa noticed us!"

"Focus, Connie!"

The camera shook, showing images of Titans storming through towns, faces twisted in sick smiles, blood splattered on the screen. "*Scream and cry, but none will hear you. Plead and beg but none will help you*."

Eren inhaled, recognizing the scene in front of them. Armin closed his eyes tightly, and Mikasa touched her scarf, taking a deep breath.

Nobody said anything, leaving the trio to their own thoughts.

The image changed, showing a courtyard with an obelisk in the centre, people lined up, standing at attention. "*You no longer live as cattle. Will you rise and join the battle*?" The people all saluted as one, and the camera focused on Eren's face as he glared ahead, Jean, Marco and Connie in the background.

Connie burst out laughing. “Look at Eren’s face!”

Jean shook his head with a sigh. “Suicidal rage issues.”

“You’re not much better yourself, Jean.”

“You should probably get a haircut,” Petra commented, giggling when Eren flushed.

A row of soldiers stood together, drawing their swords as they ran off the Wall, charging towards a horde of Titans.

“That’s from the Battle of Trost,” Krista realized with a small gasp.

Armin bit his lip. *They probably died, then*.

“*There are beings that live off fears, and their words are like knives as they play with our lives.*” More images flashed on screen: a colorful, sketchy image of the Colossal Titan’s face; random words on colorful backgrounds, flashing randomly; a long-haired, smiling Titan, eyes wild.

“That’s hella creepy,” Connie muttered. Sasha nodded fervently. Bertolt focused intensely on a dog sniffing at a lamppost outside.

“I’m getting a headache,” Moblit groaned, rubbing his forehead.

The next shot showed the gates of Maria being demolished, shards of stone flying in slow-motion through the air, the image of the goddess’s face bloodred. In the air, Eren hovered, the wires of his ODM shot somewhere below him. His eyes were wide, and he grit his teeth, letting out a shout before the screen blew to black. “*They’ll try to control you, as if they own you. Will you let them steal your freedom?*”

Jean coughed pointedly and Ymir not-whispered. “*Anger management*.”

“The Wall just exploded, and *that’s* what you’re thinking about?”

There was a close-up of somebody’s ODM gear, barely visible for a moment before a puff of air escaped, shooting the user forwards.

“Trost,” Jean recognized the buildings of his hometown immediately.

“Yes,” Erwin agreed. “A lot of this opening seems to be focused on that particular battle.”

“Maybe because that’s where Eren discovered his Titan powers?” Armin suggested. Erwin hummed thoughtfully, and then glanced at Omni.

“The first ten episodes or so that we’ll be watching are going to be separated into three main arcs,” she said.

“What are arcs?” Hange asked.

“It’s an extended storyline with different important points,” Marco said. Omni gave him a thumbs-up.

“I’m guessing will be about the fall of Wall Maria up until Trost,” Ymir said.

Annie flew through the air, swords drawn, before flipping mid-air and shooting ahead. Two cables shot out from below her and Mikasa flipped through the air, slashing her swords

before flying off as well. "*Channel the anger swelling inside you, fighting the boundary 'til you break through*."

"Not bad, you two!" Mike said, and both Mikasa and Annie smiled tentatively.

"Well, we've got no shortage of anger," Levi grumbled. Eren flushed, and even Mikasa chuckled.

"Come on, Captain!"

"Don't you Captain me."

Eren ran along a roof, shooting into the air and attacking a blonde Titan, blades slicing out the nape as the Titan jerked, falling forwards. "*So, make yourself the one, Jäger!*"

"Not bad!" Petra said, and he grinned.

"Na-na-na-na-na, na-na-na-na-na, na-na-na-na-na-na, *Jäger*!" Connie and Sasha sang along, grinning.

"Hunter," Eld said thoughtfully. "That's not a bad sentiment."

Soldiers were shown lining up canons along the top of the Wall as Titans lumbered forwards. A soldier fired the canon, and there was a flash of light. "*There is a wild fire inside you, burning desire you can't extinguish*." The large flash turned into multiple tiny ones as soldiers standing in a lift fired rifles at approaching Titans.

"And *that* is the last thing I remember," Marco said.

"That sucks," Jean grumbled, crossing his arms.

"Yeah. Hey, how did I die?"

It was quiet enough to hear a pin drop. Marco nodded, seeming to understand. "Ah," he said, slightly paler. "Okay. Bad. Got it."

Eren ran across the Wall, face contorted in fury, swords drawn, and leapt off the side. The screen froze with him leaping towards the Colossal Titan. "*Your crimson arrow rips through the twilight. This is the moment for war!*"

"You took on the Colossal?" Petra gasped.

"Tried to," Eren sounded distinctly disgruntled. "It disappeared. Bastard."

"Bertolt, stop sweating," Reiner hissed.

"Sorry," the taller boy whispered, so as not to get anybody's attention.

"Just don't do it into your *tea*, goddamnit."

The Survey Corps' flag appeared on screen, rippling in the breeze as music continued to play. A blond-haired soldier spun in the air in slow-motion, leaving behind imprints of himself as he went. A group of soldiers leapt into the air, drawing their swords as the wind blew through their hair.

"That's some sick coordination," Jean muttered.

More soldiers leapt into the air in perfect synchronization and the camera panned over rows of Titans.

"I take it back; this beats it by a landslide."

The camera flew up, past rows of soldiers in the air. A series of images flashed on screen – blood and gore flew everywhere as strange, sketched images in boxes flashed over the soldiers, mixed in with yellow lightning, flashes of light, and images of Titans.

"Is that us?" Jean asked.

"Man we look weird," Connie said.

Images of battle appeared and disappeared, and one of Eren's eyes opened wide before a cable shot across his face.

"I'm getting dizzy," Connie groaned, putting his face in his hands.

Stills of Eren, Armin, and Mikasa charging through the air, gear engaged and swords out, appeared, before vanishing and showing the three of them, along with Sasha, Jean, Annie, and Reiner staring up at the blue sky, grass rippling by their feet, the sun shining down on them as the chorus rose in a crescendo and cut off.

"I've been wondering," Erwin said as a few people clapped. "What exactly is it that you do here at the branches?"

Omni shrugged. "There's a load of jobs," she said. "Most characters choose desk jobs, management, or stuff like that—you know, business meetings, financial plans, advertisement, et cetera, et cetera. We're basically just a really big corporation."

"We *are* just a really big corporation," Marco said.

"What's your job?" Mike asked.

Omni sighed. "I am of the very few who choose to do all the grunt work—actually *doing* the TV Spirit—that's the nickname for the job—stuff. Making sure that the characters' stay is comfortable, and all that."

"I'm her intern," Marco said. "I mean, eventually, I'll be promoted and do it on my own, but I like it. I met the Mysterious Benedict Society and their parents last week—they were really cool!"

"Who're—"

"Shh," Omni said, waving her hand. "They just learned about TVs, let's not tell them about the universe where they're used to achieve complete world domination."

"Wait, *what?*"

Episode – 1. To You, in 2000 Years: The Fall of Shinganshina, Part 1

Eren inhaled sharply when the episode title was displayed on the screen and glanced nervously at Armin and Mikasa. *She said she'd be showing us the past. . . but she wouldn't—!*

In the back of the room, another trio sat, heartbeats stuttering, sweat pooling in the palms of nervous, jittery hands as their breaths came short and panicked.

The episode started off completely silent as a yellow sky faded onto the screen, two geese flying by passing scenic clouds. A low, echoing noise grew louder as the two birds were reflected in one large, green eye.

"It's completely quiet," Sasha whispered needlessly, skin prickling.

"Creepy," Jean muttered.

People on the ground stared up at the sky, all wearing different expressions, a mix of confusion, curiousity, terror as they all looked at one spot. A white dog growled, leaning down and barking silently.

"Grandpa," Armin whispered, spotting the old man standing at a market stall. Mikasa's shoulder bumped his, and Eren bit his lip. Mike glanced at them from the corner of his eye.

The geese flew by a tower and the camera panned, showing a massive red hand holding onto the top of a fifty-meter wall, steam rising up from behind it. Younger versions of Mikasa, Eren, and Armin stared up at it, eyes wide, mouths agape as they stood in the crowd.

"Oh, shit," Hange whispered. Moblit wordlessly picked up the notebook and pencil that had appeared on the ground next to him and poised the tip of the pencil over the paper.

"*On that day, humanity remembered*." People began running and screaming as a massive shadow loomed over the Wall, casting itself over people, squares, streets, and buildings.

"Is that the narrator?" Eren asked. "It sounds like you, Armin."

"You're right," the blond boy frowned. "Wonder why."

A massive head raised over the top of the Wall: skinless, muscle stretched tightly over bones, brown eyes appraising the humans below coldly. "*The fear of being in control by them*." Steam rose from the Titan's face as the camera moved back, showing the larger-than-life creature standing over the city. "*The humiliation of being imprisoned*." The camera focused on Eren's eyes, pupils contracted, wide with horror.

"The fact that it's so quiet just freaks me out," Gunther muttered.

"It's unnerving," Petra agreed.

Dramatic, choral music began playing as the camera moved, showing the Colossal's back, and then a bird's-eye view of the district, the Titan standing at the Gate, steam rising into the air.

"It's so *big*," Jean muttered. Of course, he'd knew it was bigger than the Walls, but he'd never seen it before. Looking at it now, on the day it had ruined millions of lives and thrown humanity for a loop, towering over the Wall. . . it was insane.

Bertolt gulped.

The camera shook as a bird flew by it, and, suddenly the scene changed.

A few people jumped at the rustling of feathers.

"Jeez," Ymir whispered.

Horses whinnied as they galloped through a forest, kicking up mud as they ran through a large puddle, rain falling in sheets.

"Is that. . ?" Jean asked.

"The Scouts." Erwin winced. "That was not a good expedition."

A man charged forwards, green cloak flapping as he rode. "All hands, prepare for battle!" he commanded. The camera focused on his ODM box as his horse moved. "There's only one target! Stop it by any means!"

The camera moved, showing Hange, Moses, and Erwin as they rode. "The gate is mankind's first stronghold beyond the Walls!"

"Commander! It's you!" Sasha said. "And you, too, Hange!"

Erwin tried to smile as the recruits cheered them on, but could only manage a grimace at the memory of what happened during the fight.

Erwin started. "Target approaching!" he shouted.

The camera moved, whipping through the forest to show a large-bellied Titan moving slowly through the trees.

"Oh, jeez, that's fat," Ymir muttered.

Shadis threw his arm out. "Split into five groups as we've practiced!" The horses split, charging around a massive tree. "We'll be the decoy. All squadrons, engage omni-directional mobility gear! For my brothers!"

Moses yanked out his swords and pressed a trigger. His cable anchored onto a tree and the camera swept around his mechanism, showing the wire as it was yanked taught. The Scouts flew into the air, Moses twisting a few times before shooting off-screen.

Erwin swung forwards, followed by two Squad Members as a group on the ground charged the Titan. "We'll strike from all directions!" Moses shouted, swinging around a tree. He shouted, pulling out his blades. "We'll show you the strength of humanity!" The camera moved in on the Titan's nape as Moses spun in the air, blades slicing through the air before the screen went black.

Mike closed his eyes, and Hange sighed quietly. Levi bit his lip, crossing his arms.

"Not good?" Eld asked. Levi shook his head.

"Not good at all."

Purple flowers danced as a breeze blew through a field, leaves and petals reflecting the bright sunlight. Suddenly, the image shuddered, flashing, a spray of blood covering it, and a toothy mouth opened wide for a brief second as red continues splashing over the screen.

More than a few people jumped, grabbing the people next to them.

A wide-eyed corpse was picked up from the ground, and a windmill was shown on a grassy plain. Titans flashed into existence behind it before the scene vanished, the wide mouth opening again in a dark forest.

"What's happening?" Krista squeaked.

A slumped suit was shown in front of a crackling fire before that image was replaced by a child's bed, covered in toys, sunlight streaming in through a window. An image of four mangled bodies in a rainy forest appearing, a wide eye in a blood-splattered face with a bug crawling over it flashing onto the screen. Dark limbs yanked a limp body from a pile of rubble, and Eren's eyes flew open with a gasp.

"What the *fuck*, Jaeger?" Oluo choked out, still clinging onto Petra's arm in an iron grip. "What kind of kid dreams like—" he squawked as he chomped down on his tongue.

"What the fuck?" Ymir muttered as Eld shoved a tissue between his jaws.

Two black birds burst from a tree, flying away as Mikasa knelt over Eren.

"Oh, my god," Petra gasped, a hand on her chest. "That freaked me out."

Eren's eyes were wide, breaths short as he focused on Mikasa. "Mikasa. Hey."

"We should get back," she said.

"Um, where are we, exactly?"

"Seriously, Jaeger?" Jean scoffed. "What was *up* with you as a kid?"

"I don't know!" Eren defended. "I don't even remember having that dream!"

"Maybe it has something to do with his Titan powers," Eld mused, stroking his chin. "I mean, if he was a Shifter back then."

Hange frowned, tapping their pencil against their cheek. "Maybe. . ."

Mikasa stood up. "Did you sleep so deeply that you forgot where you are?" she asked.

"I don't know. . ." he sat up, rubbing his eyes. "The dream I was having went on forever." A cloud drifted overhead, throwing them into shadow. "What was it about. . ?" He dropped his arm. "I can't remember."

"If I had a dream like that, I would've tried my best to forget about it," Sasha agreed. "I mean, all those Titans and blood?" She shuddered.

Mikasa stood, pulling the straps of a load of firewood over her shoulders. "Eren," she turned to him. "Why were you crying?"

Jean snorted. "Come on, Jaeger. I know it was a scary dream, but I thought you were *tougher* than that." He ended his sentence with a simpering smirk. Mikasa grabbed the back of Eren's shirt, forcing him back into his seat before he could reply.

"Don't say that, Jean," Krista said. "I mean, I would have cried if I'd seen that, too!"

“Yeah, but you’re—” Ymir lobbed an apple across the room, hitting him on the head. “Ouch!”

Moblit leaned over, tapping Eren’s knee. “Are they always like this?”

He sighed. “Unfortunately.”

Eren started, raising a hand to touch the teary corner of his eye. A gust of wind blew the cloud away, and sunlight streamed back down.

***Year 845, Shinganshina District*.**

“I think we got that,” Oluo snorted. “Oof!” He grunted as an elbow nudged his ribs sharply from both sides, one from Petra and one from Eld. “What?”

Petra glared daggers at him as she pointed a thumb at Eren, Armin, and Mikasa, who watched the scene mutely, eyes dull. Oluo’s eyes widened and he mouthed ‘oh’, nodding a few times before leaning back and crossing his arms.

The scene faded back onto the screen as the camera closed in on a cannon at the top of the Wall.

“Listen!” Titans stomped towards the Wall, reaching up to scratch at the surface. “These walls are a bulwark gifted by God!”

“Look at that tiny one sitting on the ground,” Connie snorted.

“Kinda looks like you, don’t you think, Baldy?” Ymir sneered.

“Huh? Hey, say that to my face!”

Krista narrowed her eyes as she peered at the background. “Hey, are those houses in the background?”

“Oh, yeah,” Hange said. “Those are ruins from little settlements before the Walls were built. We used to use them during Expeditions, before, well. . .” they trailed off awkwardly, scratching the corner of their mouth. Bertolt seemed to shrink slightly at their words, lifting their teacup to cover their face.

“It’s okay, Bert,” Reiner muttered. “We’re the good guys, remember?”

The camera panned over the city as a shabbily-dressed pastor stood in the street, preaching to the uninterested people as they walked by, ignoring him. “The Walls themselves are God protecting us. None shall defile them! The Walls must not be damaged!”

“Ugh,” Ymir snorted. “Hate those guys.”

“Ymir!” Krista admonished.

“Nah, gotta agree with Freckles on that one,” Jean crossed his arm. “Jeez—they were built by human hands, not some god.”

Eren winced, forehead suddenly throbbing. “What is it?” Mikasa asked.

“Nothing,” Eren said. “That guy’s blabbing’s just giving me a headache, is all.” He gestured at the screen.

The camera panned over the Wall to the Interior of Wall Maria. "Don't let anyone know I was crying," Eren said as he and Mikasa crossed a bridge over a small stream."

"Did you normally go into the Interior to collect firewood?" Petra asked. "Isn't there a forested mountain in Shinganshina? Why bother with the trip?"

Armin glanced at Eren and Mikasa as they shared a look.

"It was easier," Mikasa said, voice flat. "The mountains were dangerous."

"Wild dogs," Eren chimed in.

Mike raised an eyebrow, glancing at Erwin, Levi, and Hange. "They don't have to say anything if they don't want to," Erwin said quietly. "If it's important, Omni will show us, right?" He glanced at Omni.

Mike snorted. The god was leaned back in her loveseat, one of her many volumes open over her face as she snored quietly into the pages, an abandoned bowl of popcorn on her lap. "Good luck with that one, Erwin," he chuckled. "I don't think you'll be getting any answers out of Miss High and Mighty anytime soon."

"I won't," Mikasa swore. "But crying for no apparent reason. . . you might want your father to look into it."

"Isn't that a bit of an overreaction?" Sasha asked. "I mean, kids cry in their sleep all the time, right?"

"No way!" Eren protested as they passed through the Gate. "I can't talk about that with my father!"

"Why not?" Connie asked.

Armin coughed into his fist while Mikasa smiled lightly. "Well, Eren was always an, uh, *independent* kid," he chuckled while Eren rolled his eyes.

"Was *not*."

"You had two friends, Eren."

"What are you crying about, Eren?" The two looked up as a Garrison soldier stepped in front of them.

"Hey, Mr. Hannes."

The rosy-cheeked soldier glanced down at him. "Or did Mikasa get mad at you?" He leaned down, planting his hands on his hips.

Erwin frowned. "Is he. . . drunk?"

"Always," Eren sighed.

Levi scowled. "Dumbass," he growled. "Slackers like him are part of the reason why we were so badly prepared for the Colossal and Armored." Bertolt flinched, and Reiner gripped his shoulder tightly while Annie bit her lip.

"What?" Eren shouted. "Why would I cry? Ugh!" He leaned back, covering his nose. "You smell like a drunk!"

"Look at all those empty bottles on the bench!" Hange cried indignantly. "The bastards've been going at it all day!"

A few other soldiers laughed from where they sat around a crate, playing cards and drinking from mugs and bottles. "Oh, leave him alone," a sandy-haired man chuckled, taking a swig from his bottle.

"You're drinking again?" Eren asked, frowning.

"Even a little kid knows better than them!" Petra crossed her arms, glaring at the TV. "He should be ashamed."

Eren looked down at his lap, biting his lip, while Mikasa took a very deliberate drink of apple juice.

"You kids care for a swig?"

"Why, that little—!" Mike inhaled sharply, glaring at the TV. "First he's drunk on the job, and then he's offering it to minors?!"

"Aren't you on duty?" Eren asked, looking up at him.

"Again, Eren has more sense than him! *Eren!*" Ymir said.

"Hey! What's that supposed to mean?"

"Yup!" he grinned, tapping his chest casually with his fist. "Watching the old Gate, we are." He sighed, putting his hands back on his hips and closing his eyes. "It's thirsty work, posting sentry all day." He shrugged. "It's trivial to have a bit of alcohol mixed with our drinks."

"Trivial," Levi snorted. "Yeah, on literally any *other* day, maybe." The corners of Armin's mouth tightened, and in the back of the room, Annie fidgeted with her silver ring.

Reiner seized her wrist, eliciting a startled gasp from her. "What are you doing?" he hissed. "We can't risk that, right now."

She bit her lower lip. "I'm just—bored."

Reiner's eyes narrowed. "That better be all it is."

Eren grit his teeth, grip on his straps shaking as he clenched his fists. "How do you expect to fight if you're so loose on your feet?" he demanded. Mikasa glanced over at him.

"Wow, Eren," Jean said. "You were a hothead, even back then."

Hannes looked up with a confused sound. "Now, why on earth would I have to fight?"

"He sounds genuinely confused," Eld frowned.

"I mean, we've had almost a hundred years without only one breach," Marco said. "Makes sense that he wouldn't have expected it."

"Still!" Ymir said. "Jeez, the Walls are *old*. There was always a risk."

"Well, nobody could have expected a Titan bigger than the Walls," Petra sighed. "How could they have?"

"Why do you think?" Eren snapped. "What if they break through the Walls?"

Blood spurted as a merchant chopped a wriggling fish in half.

Krista jumped, grabbing onto Ymir's arm, then let go with a sheepish smile.

"Eren, please," Hannes groaned as the boy glared defiantly up at him. "Don't shout so suddenly." He massaged his forehead with a wince as the other Garrison guards watched.

"The doctor's kid has some fire in him!" the other soldier who'd spoken earlier laughed, standing up. He walked forwards to stand next to Hannes. "If something happens, we'll be sure to hop into action."

"Look at that beer belly," Levi sneered. "I doubt his ODM would even be able to carry him if he was sober and trying."

"But, you know," he continued. "There hasn't been a single incident in a hundred years."

"Wrong!" Omni suddenly shouted, jolting up, book flying off her face and crashing into the wall.

"What—" Omni slumped over before Erwin could finish, landing face-first int the carpet with another snore.

"Sorry," Marco jumped to his feet, rushing over to her. "She's been up for five days straight," he continued apologetically as he lifted her face into the seat.

"It's all right," Erwin said as Marco took her wrists and clapping her hands together. The popcorn spilled on the ground vanished, and he put the bowl on the table. "What did she mean, 'wrong'? Has there been a breach before?"

Marco frowned, glancing at the bookshelves as he sat back down next to Jean. "Yeah, decades ago. . . I can try to dig out the book later, if you'd like."

"That would be nice, thank you."

"But. . ." Eren clenched his fists. "My father says that it's times like these that are the most dangerous!"

"Smart guy," Gunther said. "Where is he now?"

"No idea," Eren muttered. "We never saw him after the Wall fell."

"Ah," Gunther furrowed his brow. "I'm sorry."

"Dr. Jaeger said that?" Hannes glanced up contemplatively. The camera panned over a marketplace as he spoke. "You can't argue with a man who saved us from an epidemic." Two blacksmiths chatted with two blushing girls as they hammered a piece of metal. "But this is different."

Hange felt their heart grow heavy as they watched the scenes of life flashing on the screen. *So many lives cut short. . . for what?*

Bertolt looked down at his hands, nails digging into his palms just hard enough to avoid drawing blood.

He glanced over his shoulder. "As a soldier, you sometimes see them when we're reinforcing the Walls." The camera panned over the rooftops and the Wall, which loomed so high above them. "But there's no way they can do anything to Walls fifty meters high."

"Wrong," Ymir muttered. Krista smacked her. She winced, but didn't say anything.

"So," Eren said. "You all have no inclination to fight them?"

"Not really," Hannes shrugged.

"At least he's honest," Jean sighed.

"What?" Eren protested. "Then you should call yourselves the Wall Cleanup Club, not soldiers!"

"Sassy!" Hange said. "But right."

"Not a bad idea!" Hannes chuckled. "However," he said. "Only in a worst-case scenario are we soldiers deployed." He looked down at him. "While we soldiers are made fun of and live for free, it's proof that everyone lives safely in peace."

"I guess that's true," Sasha muttered, then sighed. *What I'd give to have those easy times back*.

Eren's fist shook with the force that he was clenching it with. "We can sit around idly," he said quietly. "And just live while we are confined inside these Walls." Mikasa watched out of the corner of her eye. "But that means we're no different from livestock." He stared at the ground, teeth gritted.

"Angry little revolutionary, weren't you?" Mike commented.

"I bet you were one of those dumb brats who rushed onto the streets every time the Scouts came home," Jean snorted.

"Hey, what's that supposed to mean?" Petra said.

"Nothing," Jean shrugged. "Just saying—those kids were idiot hero-worshippers. Bet you anything that they would have turned tail and ran if they'd gotten even a glimpse at what happens on the other side of the Wall."

"Let me guess, you were a Corps-hater?" Eld said dryly.

"Yeah," Jean grumbled. "But here I am, so I guess I must be just as dumb as the rest of you."

Sasha laughed, wrapping an arm around his neck. "Oh, come on! You know you love us!"

"Do not."

Hannes started at the sight of Eren's expression, and glanced to the side as the other Garrison members began laughing.

"You were right about the kid having courage," a dark-haired man chortled.

Maybe too much. Mikasa sighed.

"Thou there's nothing he can do about it," another one snickered.

"Uh—yeah," Hannes grinned uneasily. "Hey, Eren!" he called as the brunet walked away, Mikasa following.

"Heh," the sandy-haired soldier chuckled. "What a strange kid."

Hannes frowned. "I wonder if he wants to join the Scout Regiment?"

"What, even back then?" Moblit said, surprised.

Hange chuckled. "At least we had *some* support back in those days, even if it was just from—how did you phrase it, Jean? Ah, yes: *idiot hero-worshipping brats*."

Erwin sighed. *I just wish so many of them didn't choose to join us*.

Eren and Mikasa walked up a stone path behind a cluster of houses in silence. "Eren," Mikasa said suddenly. "You should forget about joining the Scout Regiment."

"Oh, look," Sasha joked. "It's the only brain cell in the image."

"Hey!" Eren protested.

Eren's eyes widened, and he looked at her. "Why does everybody think they're a joke?"

Ymir rolled her eyes. "She's just trying to keep you from getting killed, dumbass."

"I can take care of myself," he snapped. Mikasa bit her lip, looking down at he pomegranate.

"That's not the issue," she said. They both stopped as a bell began clanging.

"The Scout Regiment's back!" Eren cried as they watched the bell swing back and forth in the tower. "They're going to open the main Gate." He turned to her. "We can make it if we hurry. I want a good view!"

Mike winced, and Hange glanced away.

"What?" Marco asked, noticing the older Scouts' expressions.

"Like we said," Levi replied dully. "It wasn't a good Expedition."

"Uh—" he grabbed her hand and dragged her after him as he ran forwards.

Hooves clattered on the ground as the Scouts walked into the Walls, some walking, some riding, and others in the wagons whose wheels jolted as they were pulled down the bumpy dirt path. People lined up on the sides of the street, muttering to each other as the Scouts walked by.

"They don't sound happy," Sasha whispered.

"The Scouts or the civilians?" Connie whispered back.

"Both."

"Argh!" Eren craned his neck to look over the shoulder of a woman with a basket full of baguettes. "I can't see a thing!" He rushed by, bumping into a bald man with a beard and mustache. He hopped onto a crate and stood up straight, grinning, as Mikasa climbed up next to him.

Moblit sighed, looking down. He knew that that smile would be gone soon.

Erwin rode his horse down the street, two members of his squad behind him. He glanced up as he rode past, spotting Eren's grinning face. He frowned, looking away, keeping his eyes locked on the path.

"Commander?" Krista said, surprised. "Do you remember seeing him?"

Erwin shook his head. "I. . . was focused on other things."

Hange bit their lip as they focused on the blood on Erwin's cloak. *Moses*.

Eren's face fell as he watched him ride away in confusion.

"Mikasa sure doesn't look like she wants to be there," Ymir joked.

"I—" Mikasa glanced at Eren and fell silent. *I didn't want to fuel his obsession. . . but I'm kind of glad he saw what happens when you join the Scouts*. She sighed, eyes falling on the patch on his jacket. *Too bad it didn't work*.

He glanced back down the street, and his eyes widened with a horrified gasp.

"Oh," Annie said quietly.

Bloodstained soldiers lined the street as they staggered home: a man with a bandage wrapped tightly over a bloody eye socket limped forwards, an arm tossed over a dark-haired man's shoulder; a blond man atop a horse had the entire bottom half of his face wrapped up, blood staining it from his nose and cheek; an unconscious man lay in a wagon, head resting on a small bundle of straw, an arm wrapped in a sling and a leg tightly bandaged, his crush ODM gear lying next to him.

Krista put a horrified hand to her mouth. "Was it like this *every* Expedition?"

"We're better prepared now," Erwin said. "But, still. . ."

"It's carnage every time," Mike sighed.

Countless more injured soldiers rode behind a wild-eyes man with scraggly brown hair and wrinkles on his forehead.

"He looks familiar," Sasha muttered.

"I'd assume so," Moblit said. "That's our former Commander, Keith Shadis. You probably know him better as your Commandant."

"Wait, *Shadis* was in the *Corps?*" Jean's mouth dropped.

"Explains why he's so tough," Reiner muttered, a chill racing over his skin.

"Only this many returned?" a man asked as they rode by.

"The rest of them got eaten," another sighed.

Eren and Mikasa watched, eyes wide. "That's what happens when you go outside the Walls," the first man sighed.

Erwin winced. He wished there was a way to keep children from watching when they went home. *There's no reason for them to see such bloodshed*. But, then again, it was a two-sided coin, with the other argument being that it, at least, could help dissuade the weaker ones from joining the Corps. *And yet*. . . a small smile graced his lips as he glanced at the recruits in the room.

"Moses? Moses?" The two children looked to the side as an aged woman walked into the street. "Excuse me," she said, walking up to the Keith. "Where is my son? He should be with you." She walked up to him, gripping his blood-stained cloak.

Moblit winced, and Mike began muttering. “Ah, shit. Ah, *shit*.”

“Oh,” Mikasa said quietly. “I remember this.”

Keith’s expression was impassive as he looked down at her. “This is Moses’s mother,” he said. He glanced at a dark-haired, mustachioed man next to him. “Bright it forth.” The old woman staggered back, eyes widening.

Levi sighed. “Bad choice on the old man’s part,” he muttered.

The man walked forwards and deposited something in her arms. She looked down at the bloody wrap and gasped. Her eyes were wide with horror as she looked up at Keith. He stared back at her and she lifted away the blood-stained fabric.

A bruised, bloody hand appeared as the wrappings fell away and she gasped with horror, covering it back up, shoulder shaking. “I’m sorry,” Shadis said as she let out a pained sob. “It’s all that was left of him.” The other Scouts were looking away while the citizens watched on.

Erwin shook his head with a small sigh. “That could have been managed better,” he said.

The woman collapsed to her knees, clutching the severed arm and wailing openly. Eren’s eyes were wide with horror while Mikasa watched on sadly, brows furrowed. Shadis knelt as the woman began speaking. “Was he useful?” she asked. He started. Tears flowed down the woman’s face as she stared into space, eyes blazing. “Tell me that, despite his missing hand, his sacrifice gave us a better chance!” She finished in a scream, raising her head to stare at Shadis.

A breeze blew by, dust and dry blown away as Shadis stared at the grieving mother. “Of course!” he stuttered. His eyes widened as he watched her continue to cradle the limb. “But. . .” his shoulders dropped. “This time. . .” the Scouts were silent as he continued speaking. “No, just like it was before. . .” He grit his teeth, squeezing his eyes shut. “It was all futile!” he cried. Tears ran down her cheeks as Moses’s mother stared at him in horror. “Because of my incompetence, I’ve lost my comrades.” The citizens watched in shock and horror as Shadis broke down. “And I wasn’t able to discern anything about them!” Eren’s eyes were wide as he listened to Shadis scream, tear racing down his face.

“Keith was under a lot of pressure at the time,” Erwin said in response to the horrified and disgusted looks on the recruits’ faces. “He stepped down the moment we got back to headquarters.”

“But, still. . .” Sasha’s eyes were wide. “Yelling at a mother, right after she lost her son, and telling her his death was meaningless. . .”

“Personally, I never thought the guy was cut out for leadership,” Levi said. “Sure, he was loud, and had a knack for discipline, but that was it. He could never handle any blows to his pride.”

“How outrageous,” a man said as the last wagon rolled away.

“Absolutely,” another man grumbled. “It’s as if our taxes go towards keeping those bastards fed.” He shouted, spittle flying from his mouth as a stick smacked his head. He grunted, grabbing his skull and looking to the side to see a furious Eren, still wielding the branch. “You little brat!”

“Go, Eren!” Sasha whooped.

Eren raised his stick for another blow, but, before he could do anything, Mikasa’s hand shout of from around the corner and grabbed him, yanking him away.

“Jeez,” Ymir said. “That hand popping out of nowhere is freakish as hell.”

“Oi!” Eren cried, arms flailing as she dragged him away, his heels digging into the ground. “What are you doing?” he demanded as she soldiered on. “Mikasa!”

“Hey!” the man shouted, darting into the alley. “Come back here!”

“All right, I get it!” Eren protested. “Stop, already!”

Mikasa grunted and swung Eren forwards, tossing him into the side of a building. He shouted as he crashed into it, landing on his stomach, firewood scattering all over the place. Mikasa walked forwards calmly as he got to his knees. “Oh, great!” he groaned. “Now the kindling’s everywhere!”

A few people gasped.

“Damn, Mikasa!” Connie said. “I guess you were always a powerhouse.”

“That shouldn’t be possible,” Hange muttered, scribbling in their notebook. “I mean, they’re the same size, and she did it like he weight nothing. . !” they continued babbling incoherently as they wrote.

“So,” she said. “Are you still bound and determined to join the Scouts?”

“So overprotective,” Eren grumbled, crossing his arms. Mikasa bit her lip, looking away. Armin sighed, rolling his eyes.

He looked up from his frantic quest to collect the sticks. She didn’t break eye contact as she kept staring down at him.

He looked away, brows furrowed. “Just help me pick these up.”

She walked forwards, kneeling next to him. “There’s not much to help.”

“Oof,” Jean muttered. “Roasted.”

Disclosure:

“What’s this?” Erwin wondered. “An episode break?”

Walls, Part 1

Humanity lives within three Walls. The exterior Wall is Maria, the interior is Wall Rose, the centre Wall is Wall Sina.

“Cool, but we already knew that,” Jean said.

Walls, Part 2

The spaces between the Walls are roughly equally apart. Maria and Rose: 100 km apart; Rose and Sina 130 km apart. Sina is approximately 250 km from the epicentre.

"Okay, that's a bit cooler," Ymir admitted.

"Jeez!" Hange cried, tongue between their teeth as they scribbled. "The Walls are *huge*. Even without Wall Maria, we've got. . ." Their eyes widened behind their glasses. "Four hundred and fifty-four *thousand* kilometers squared."

Eld spit out a mouthful of water (Levi leaned back, wrinkling his nose). "*What?*"

Eren and Mikasa walked up the stairs to the Jaeger's house. "Hey, we're home," Eren said as he pushed open the door.

"Damn, Eren!" Sasha said. "You've got pine martens and geese hanging from the ceiling!"

"Were you guys rich, or something?" Connie asked. "I mean, you've got quality meat, and your house is huge!"

Eren frowned. "I. . . never really thought about that," he admitted. "I guess so?"

"Welcome home, kids," Carla said as she ladled soup into bowls. Grisha glanced over his shoulder, pausing in his writing, and smiled.

Eren inhaled, and Mikasa closed her eyes. *Mom*.

The wood clattered as Eren dumped it into a box. "Wow, Eren," Carla said, Mikasa pumping water into cups in the background. "You worked unusually hard today."

Jean snorted, but didn't say anything, sensing the tense atmosphere.

"Sure," he said, glancing to the side. Carla leaned down and pinched his ear. He winced, pulling out of her grasp and rubbing it. "What was that for?" he asked.

"Your ears are red," she smiled. "Which means you've got something to hide. Mikasa helped you again, now, didn't she?"

"Always," Eren muttered. "She always helped, and I was always fooling around. Damnit, *damnit*." He bit his lip, not seeming to realize he was talking out loud. Mikasa stared down at the floor.

Reiner clenched his fists, and Annie took a deep breath.

Orange flowers grew below the window of the dining room. "Hey, where are you going, Dad?" Eren asked, scraping out his bowl. "Work?

"Yes," Grisha said, tapping his books into a neat pile. "Some people in the interior." He put them into his bag. "I should be back in a few days."

"If he was going to the Interior when the Wall fell, maybe he's still there!" Sasha suggested. "I don't know, we're short on doctors right now, aren't we? Or it was just safer in there?"

"Maybe," Eren said quietly.

“But Eren’s trail was in Mitras,” Ymir said. “Everybody knew about it. If Grisha’s such an important doctor, wouldn’t he have tried to pull some strings and save Eren.”

“Oh.” Sasha deflated. “Oh, right. Sorry, Eren.”

“Hm,” Eren lifted the bowl to slurp up the remaining contents.

Mikasa was silent as she poked her soup. “Eren’s thinking about joining the Scouts,” she said suddenly.

“Busted,” Connie muttered.

Carla gasped, turning around, and Grisha froze, looking up. Eren stared at Mikasa, jaw agape. “You said you wouldn’t tell!” he cried indignantly, tossing the bowl and spoon on the table.

“Lesson of the day, kids, don’t tell Ackerman your secrets,” Mike joked. A few people chuckled.

“Eren,” Carla bustled around the table. “What are you thinking?” She grabbed his shoulders. “Do you know how many people have died outside those Walls?” she demanded.

“I know that!” he shouted.

“Why?” Eren whispered. “Why did I have to shout at her? On that day, too?” Bertolt looked at his lap.

“So why—” Carla’s voice rose.

“Eren,” Grisha interrupted, and both mother and son looked at him. “Why do you want to go beyond the Walls?” he asked.

“Just in time,” Jean muttered. He may not have been Eren’s biggest fan, but the idea of him having a fight with his mom the day she died was just way too sad.

Eren set his jaw. “I want to know what the world is like beyond those Walls,” he said. Grisha watched as he continued speaking. “I can’t stand having a life confined behind those Walls. Also, if no one survives here. . .” Mikasa watched as he grew more passionate. “All those lives we lost would be for nothing!”

“Wow,” Eld said. “I wan’t expecting you to have such a. . . good reason.”

“Why are you so good at speeches when you’ve got the clumsiest attitude ever?” Armin asked.

“Huh? What do you mean?”

Armin sighed. “Never mind.”

Grisha looked up, the sunlight reflecting off his glasses. “I see.”

“You’ve got your father’s eyes, Eren,” Krista said.

“Huh? Oh, yeah—I guess so.”

“It’s a really pretty colour,” Petra said. “I don’t think I’ve ever seen that shade of reen before.”

Eren’s eyes widened and he looked up at him in confusion. “It’s time for me to go,” Grisha said, standing up. “I’ll be late for the ferry.”

"Huh?" Hange said. "You just said you want to be a *Scout*, and he's going? What a—"

"He probably thought you were joking," Moblit said quickly, slapping his hand over Hange's mouth.

"Darling, wait!" Carla protested as Eren watched Grisha leave. "Set this boy straight!"

"Dear, please," Grisha said as they stood in the doorway, and he put on his hat. "Mere words won't hold back the boy's curiousity of the world." Carla raised her hand, but was interrupted as Grisha turned around. "Eren," he said. "When I get back, I'll let you in on what I've been secretly doing in the basement." He reached into his shirt and pulled out a thin golden key on a string around his neck.

"Ah, yes," Erwin muttered. "The basement."

"When do you think we'll get there?" Mike asked.

Erwin's eyes sparkled as he watched the TV. "If I'm right, we won't even have to go to see what's in it."

Eren's eyes widened and he grinned. "Really?" The key shone in the sunlight, and Grisha snatched it back, tucking it into his shirt.

"Have a good trip!" Eren waved as Grisha walked down the rocky steps.

"Nice neighbourhood," Levi said quietly.

Carla turned to him. "You're not allowed," she said.

"Huh?"

"This ridiculous idea about the Scout Regiment," she said.

Eren closed his eyes. "Don't do it," he whispered.

"What?" he demanded, turning to her. "Ridiculous? It seems even more ridiculous to live your life like livestock!" Carla held a hand out to him, but he turned, running down a side street.

Mikasa squeezed her eyes shut. "I'm sorry," she whispered. "If I hadn't told, then maybe—"

"But if you hadn't I wouldn't have run," he muttered back. "And we'd all have died."

"Eren!" She held out her hand futilely as he disappeared around a corner. She lowered her hand, brows furrowed. "Mikasa," she said as the girl walked down the steps, seizing her shoulders. "That boy is looking for danger," she said, eyes wide and desperate. "When he's in trouble, you have to help him."

Eren's eyes widened. *Is that why?* His heart pounded. *Why she's always hovering around me? The last promise to my mom?* He bit his lip. *Sorry, mom*.

She nodded. "Yes."

"Heh!" The camera looked up at the blue sky as a scuffling noise sounded through an alley. "Where's the sacrilege now, huh?"

Armin winced at the nasally voice. “Oh.” His ears burned at the idea of his superiors and comrades seeing him so weak.

Armin made a pained noise as he was slammed into a wall. “Why don’t you hit back, if you’re aggravated?” He reached up to grab weakly at bully’s hand.

“Look at that idiot in the dress,” Hange muttered.

He winced, glaring up at him. “No, I won’t do that,” he said. “If I do,” he continued defiantly. “I’ll stoop down to your level!”

Levi winced. *Nice of you to say, but you’ll still get your ass beat*.

“What did you say?” the boy snarled, raising a fist.

“You actually know I’m right,” Armin said, a red mark on his cheek, tears in the corners of his eyes. “But you can’t deal with it, so you resort to violence.” The bully scowled, twisting his lip. “That pretty much means you’ve surrendered to me!”

Jean winced. “Armin, no offense. . . but are you *asking* to be socked?”

Armin turned red looking down. “I just—"

The boy grit his teeth. “Shut your mouth!” he shouted, raising his hand.

“Back off!”

“Uh?” The boys started, looking to the side.

“It’s Eren!” one shouted as he ran forwards, glaring at the boys.

“Suicidal Bastard,” Ymir sighed.

“Are you back for more?” one sneered.

“Maybe he hasn’t learned his lesson,” the first boy leered.

“I’ll get him good, this time!” The third boy started, holding a hand over his eyes. “Huh?”

“M-Mikasa’s with him!” The dark-haired girl ran behind Eren, arms trailing behind her, barely breaking a sweat, eyes dull and filled to the brim with the promise of eternal torment.

The first boy gasped in horror, stumbling backwards. “Run!” The boys screamed as they flailed their arms, racing in the other direction.

A few people laughed at the almost comedic portrayal of the scene as they boys scattered like chickens.

Eren panted as he skidded to a stop. “Those guys saw me and ran!” he declared proudly as Mikasa walked up behind him.

“Oh, Eren,” Sasha sighed, smiling.

“No,” Armin said, looking up. “They left because they saw Mikasa.”

“Ouch, Armin,” Connie said. “So you were always that blunt?”

Armin stood up and wince, dropping back to his knees with a gasp.

“Are you okay, Armin?” Eren asked, walking forwards.

Armin started as Eren held out a hand, then looked away, mouth tense. “I can stand up by myself.”

Erwin raised his eyebrows. *He's prideful, but not too much. That's always good*.

"Uh—" Eren frowned, but drew his hand away as Armin stood, leaning against the wall. "Right."

The three sat on the bank on the river as the sun set. "So they heard me rattling on about how mankind's future lay beyond the Wall," Armin said as a man rowed a gondola past. "So they started beating me."

"Idiots," Eren grumbled, tossing a stone into the river. "Why does it have to be this way? Why can't people just let us dream?"

"People'll always shun what they don't understand," Levi said. "They're scared. That's about the only reason."

"We've survived for a hundred years within these Walls," Armin replied. "The whole time we've lived quietly as to not get their attention. So," he continued. "To maintain our peace, it's a taboo to have interest in what is beyond the Wall."

"You had that figured out when you were that young?" Hange said, surprised. "No wonder you're such a good strategist. It took me ages to stop playing with frogs and think it through."

Armin flushed. "Uh, thanks."

"I'm guessing the Corps is an exception to the rule," Jean said.

"Not at all," Erwin admitted. "We're constantly under a lot of political pressure. Going outside isn't just a risk to our lives—we're risking our chances for the future, too."

"Why do it, then?" Annie asked suddenly. Reiner shot her a warning glance, but quickly looked away as the others turned around to look at her.

Erwin frowned. "You joined the Military Police, right?"

"Yes, sir."

"Why did you do that?"

She blinked. "I—well, I just wanted to stay alive, I guess."

"Well, you do that by choosing a safe, comfortable life for yourself," Erwin said. "We—well, while *our* chances of survival are lower, everything we do outside the Walls increases the chance for humanity's survival. Does that answer your question?" She nodded.

"Those three have been awfully quiet," Lev commented as they looked back at the TV.

"Of course they have," Mike replied. "They're from southeast Maria."

"Ah." Levi frowned.

Eren looked away. "Well, I'll be risking my own life. I can choose what I want to do with it."

"There's no way in hell," Mikasa snapped. The boys looked at her. "No way," she said, quieter.

"Wait a minute!" Eren said, scowling. "You ratted me out to my father!"

Jean sighed, putting his hand on his forehead. “You’re *so* stupid,” he groaned.

“Huh? What do you mean?”

“See?”

“Huh?” Armin looked at him.

“I never promised you anything,” she said, looking away.

“Is the entire family that sassy, or just you two?” Hange teased.

“How did it go?” Armin said quickly as Eren grit his teeth.

“Nice going, Armin,” Ymir congratulated. “I don’t think Little Eren can stand more than one Mikasa beating a day.”

“Excuse me?!”

“They weren’t happy about it,” Eren admitted.

Armin sighed. “Not surprisingly,” he said. Leaves rustled on the ground before being blown away as a breeze blew by, and the clouds moved swiftly overhead. “I wonder,” Armin said. “About those who believe there’s a real, secure future living within these Walls.”

“It’s been going on for almost a century,” Sasha supplied. “And, well, sometimes, ignorance really *is* bliss.”

“Mama!” A beaming father watched as a little boy ran towards his mother.

Annie closed her eyes.

“Just because the Walls haven’t been breached in a hundred years,” Armin said, eyes bright and intense as he stared at the ground. “The guarantee that they won’t break through today. . .” Children laughed as they played in a schoolyard. “Just doesn’t exist.”

Krista shuddered. *His eyes. . . they’re so bright. Too intense for someone that age. It’s almost scary.*

“Oh, Armin,” Mikasa whispered. “Why, *why* do you always have to be right?”

A mother stood on a roof, cradling a small, blond-haired baby, as sheets billowed on a clothesline.

The wind stopped, and the sheets grew still. The camera focused on the Wall as two geese flew by, the sky a rainbow blend of colours in the setting sun, the clouds forming a circle over the Gate.

Not a sound was heard.

Bertolt squeezed his eyes shut, clenching his fists. Nobody said a word, knowing exactly what was coming, but, despite themselves, still hoping they were wrong.

A sudden burst of yellow lightning struck the earth right in front of the gate. Eren, Armin, and Mikasa yelled as they were jolted into the air, and other people around them cried out, stumbling as the earth shook. A sign creaked as it was thrown around, chain squeaking, and a cloud of embers and smoke rose from beyond the Wall.

“What was that?” Armin asked, standing up, touching his head gingerly. “An explosion?”

If only. There were tears in Eren's eyes, and, at this point, he didn't care who saw.

"Over there!" a man shouted, pointing.

"Did something fall?" another man asked.

"Armin, what are you doing?" Eren asked as Armin ran towards the Wall, following the crowds of people. Eren and Mikasa ran after him.

"What is it?" Eren asked as they caught up to Armin, who stood amongst other citizens as they stared up at the Wall. "What are you looking at?"

He gasped.

Krista closed her eyes, turning to bury her face in Ymir's shoulder. Eld looked down, and Petra shook her head slowly.

Dark, choral music began playing as the camera moved up, to where a massive red, skinless hand clutched the top of the Wall. The fingers gripping it tightened, and chunks of stone flew through the air.

"No!" Armin gasped. "That's impossible! That wall's fifty meters high!" The three stood on the ground, tense, staring up in horror.

Eren's eyes widened, his breathing shaky and uneven. "It's one of them."

A massive shadow rose over the town as the Colossal Titan raised its head, steam rising from its skinless face. "A Titan!"

Erwin sighed. *It was the worst possible timing*, he thought. *We were weak after the Expedition. If we'd been at full strength, then maybe*. . .

Dramatic music played as the Colossal gripped the top of the Wall and pulled its foot back. It looked up, brown eyes cold as he brought his leg forwards. The Gate exploded, the force combined with the steam from the Titan sending people flying back. A woman screamed as her baby was torn away, and she was knocked away by a flying rock. Glass and stone shattered as chunks of the Wall crashed into buildings, tearing them apart. A massive wave of dust engulfed the town, ripping buildings apart and blowing people and objects alike away. People screamed as they turned to run, the top of a tower slamming into the ground, crushing a man like a bug. More dust geysers erupted from the city as rubble flew through the air. Blood sprayed through the air as one of the boys who'd been bullying Armin was crushed by a boulder.

Tears rolled freely down faces as people watched the destruction. Bertolt's hand flew up to his mouth as he watched, and Reiner gulped, face losing a bit of its colour.

The camera moved back as countless smaller Titans began walking forwards, all headed towards the hole in the Wall. The Colossal shrank down, steam rising as its head disappeared below the top of the Wall.

"I-It blasted a hole." Armin was on the ground while Eren and Mikasa stared up in mute horror.

Footsteps pounded on the ground as a blond-haired Titan stomped through the hole. It stopped, turning to look at the crowds of people on the ground, and they screamed, turning to run. "They're coming in!"

"The Titans are coming in!"

From the moment the Colossal appeared, it was too late, Ymir thought, eyes dull as she watched.

Armin started walking backwards. "We have to go," he said. He gasped. "Eren!"

Eren stumbled forwards against the tide of people, eyes wide. "Our house is in that direction!" A woman knocked into his shoulder. "My mom!" Mikasa gasped, running after him.

Sasha closed her eyes, lashes wet and clumped together, knowing what was coming.

"Mikasa!" Armin cried, reaching out a hand. He froze, staring at his shaking arm. He reached forwards, grabbing his own wrist. "This is the end," he said quietly. Tears pricked the corners of his eyes. "Our city is going to be destroyed by all those Titans!"

Why do you always have to be right? Tears splashed in Eren's lap.

Eren and Mikasa ran down the street, crashing into people as they went. A little boy clung to his mother as she sobbed, grabbing at the bottom half of a crushed man. Eren's eyes were wide with horror as he watched the destruction and carnage around him. *Our house couldn't have been hit.* He panted as he looked forwards again. *If I turn this corner, my house will be there like always*.

"No," Annie whispered into her palm, vision blurred at the corners.

He let out a horror-struck gasp as they rounded the corner. Mikasa's eyes widened as he ran forwards. "Mom!" he screamed.

The house was decimated—a boulder had crashed straight through the ceiling, and the foundations had been crushed to rubble, the ceiling caved in on itself, heavy beams lying on top of each other. "Mom!" Carla's eyes flickered open and she looked up from where she was trapped beneath two beams.

"Eren!"

"Mikasa, grab that end!" Eren said, kneeling next to the beam. "We're going to lift the beam!" They both grunted as they pulled with all their might, shoulder quivering as they tried to move the beam.

It's too heavy, Mike thought. He doubted that even he, Levi, and Mikasa together, humanity's three strongest, wouldn't be able to lift that beam in time.

Eren froze and he looked to the side as the ground shook with the force of massive footsteps. Titans walked through the destroyed city, every step making tiles shake from roofs and the earth quiver. A tall, blonde-haired Titan walked forwards, massive smile on its face.

Eren's heart felt like lead as he stared at the shit-eating grin on the monster's face. *You*.

Eren grit his teeth. "Let's hurry, Mikasa!"

“I know!” They continued pulling at the beam, teeth grit, limbs quivering.

There’s not enough time, Eld thought, fists clenched in his lap.

“It’s them,” Carla whispered, eyes wide. “The Titans have breached the Wall.” She looked at Eren. “Eren, you’ve got to get out of here! Take Mikasa and run!”

“I want to run!” he cried, pulling harder. His fingers were soaked red as he pulled at the wood, harsh edges digging into his skin and tearing at his nails. “But you have to get out of here!” The beam shifted and jolted.

Tears streaked down Petra’s face. “Oh, my god,” she whispered, hands covering her mouth.

“My legs have been crushed,” Carla said, eyes wide as she stared ahead blankly. “Even if you could get me out of here, I can’t run.” Eren’s eyes were full of tears as he stared at her in horror. “Don’t you understand?”

“I’ll carry you!” he screamed.

“Why won’t you just shut up and listen to me for once in your life?” Carla demanded, tears flying from her eyes. There were tears in Mikasa’s eyes as she grabbed the beam. “I’m asking you to do one final thing!” The girl grit her teeth, dropping her head, hair falling over her face. “Mikasa!” Carla cried.

It’s too much, Hange thought. *She’s asking two kids to leave her to die. Tough as they are, even they can’t do that.*

“No!” Mikasa sobbed as she gave the beam another tug. “I can’t!”

It was so wrong, so fundamentally *wrong* to Connie, seeing Mikasa cry. He clenched his fists, trying to keep the tears from spilling over. *Oh, god*.

“Do you want all three of us to die?” Carla demanded as the Smiling Titan drew closer. She gasped at the sound of retracting cables as Hannes landed in front them. “Hannes!”

A few people’s breath hitched, hoping, despite their knowledge of what would happen, that he would save her.

“Take the children and get them out of here!” she ordered as he walked forwards.

He smiled as he knelt in front of her. “That’s not our only option, Carla,” he said. “I’m going to kill that Titan and save all of you!” He leapt to his feet, running forwards and drawing his swords.

“He can’t do it,” Sasha said quietly, tears on her cheeks. *He’s still drunk. If he tries, he’ll just get them all killed*.

“No, wait! Don’t do this!” Carla wailed.

Hannes ignored her as he ran. *For certain, I can save the kids*, he thought as he ran. *But this is my chance to give back the debt I owe*.

Erwin raised his eyebrows, curiousity peaked. *Debt?*

Hannes froze with a horrified gasp, screeching to a halt.

The Smiling Titan loomed over him, teeth bared in its unnatural grin, head tilted as it stared down at him.

Waves of horror rolled over everybody at the sight of the Titan's face.

Titans are our enemies, Gunther thought, heart bouncing against his ribcage. *But this is the first time I've ever thought of one as a* monster.

Hannes grit his teeth, shoving his swords back in their slots. Eren gasped as Hannes suddenly scooped him up, tossing him over his shoulder. "No! Hannes!" Mikasa gasped as he grabbed her around the waist, tucking her under his arm. "What are you doing?!"

Fresh tears streamed down Mikasa's face, and she squeezed her eyes shut as her head throbbed. *No. Please, no*.

Carla smiled, tears in her eyes as Hannes ran. "Thank you, Hannes," she said shakily.

"No!" he cried, reaching towards her, as if he could still save her. "Mom!"

"Eren!" She reached out. "Mikasa!" Eren stared at her in horror as she reached out. "You must survive!"

And I couldn't even do that. Eren closed his eyes, trying to keep from sobbing.

An image of Carla wiping food off Eren's face as they stood in the kitchen, Mikasa holding a basket of bread while Grisha watched with a smile, appeared. She gasped, and the tears flowed down her face. She shook as she brought her hand back, covering her mouth. "Don't go. . ." she whispered as she sobbed.

Mikasa inhaled sharply, and Eren made a horrified, choking noise. Krista's hands flew up to cover her mouth, and Sasha shook her head slowly, barely able to see through the tears.

"My god," Moblit whispered, .

The Smiling Titan's stopped over the house and Eren gasped as it tossed the roof aside as easily as if it had been made of paper and reached down, lifting Carla from the rubble.

"No!" Eren screamd, tears flying from his eyes as they ran. Carla struggled in the Titan's grip, kicking her legs and slamming a fist on the iron grip.

"She was kicking," Eren whispered. "Oh, my god, she was *kicking*." *She lied. She lied to save my ungrateful ass*.

Bertolt pressed his hand to his mouth to stifle a sob.

The Titan grinned as it reached down, grabbing her torso and yanking. Eren's eyes were wide with horror as he watched it bring her to its mouth. Its jaw stretched unnaturally wide as it slung Carla's limp form into its mouth, and Mikasa looked away, eyes wide, lips pursed.

Jean took in a shuddering breath at the sight of the woman's body folded entirely over the wrong way, limp and lifeless in the Titan's hand. *Holy shit*.

Tears ran down Eren's face as the yellowed teeth chomped down.

Despite being more than aware that it was coming, a few sobs were still stifled around the room. Annie buried her face in Reiner's shoulder, and he didn't reprimand her, fists shaking in his lap.

Ribbons of blood sprayed through the air, drops of red falling like petals and splattering on the ground. "*On that day, humanity remembered*." The red splashed on the ground, but Eren's eyes stayed fixed on the Titan, tears on his cheeks. "*The fear of being held in control by them*." The Smiling Titan turned, face and torso covered with blood, and swallowed, grinning up at the sky. "*The humiliation of being imprisoned*." It turned, watching as Hannes carried the children away.

Smoke and embers rose from the destroyed city as Titans milled through it, the last vestiges of the setting sun shining over the Wall.

"There's still one more episode from Shinganshina," Marco said apologetically as the end credits rolled. "If you guys don't want to watch—"

"No," Eren interrupted, taking a deep breath and dragging the heels of his hands over his eyes. "No," he said again. "I'm fine."

Mikasa nodded, and Armin followed suit, albeit a bit shaky.

Marco nodded. "Okay."

Ending – 1. This Beautiful Cruel World (Utsukushiki Zankoku na Sekai)

Gentle piano music played as black-and-white stars and planets drifted by.

"Is this the ending theme?" Mike inquired, leaning forwards.

"It's a whole lot different from the opening," Eld observed.

Jean nodded. "A whole less 'ya-ya-ya, murder!', and more 'la-la-la, pretty planets'."

"Peaceful," Moblit agreed, nodding.

A shooting star shot by as the camera drifted through the clouds, rays of sun shooting through the darkness.

"It looks different, too," Petra said. "Like somebody sketched it out with charcoal."

"Kind of messy," Oluo sniffed. "But I suppose it's nice enough—" Blood spurted from his mouth as his teeth closed over his tongue.

A knife was thrown into the air, lift reflecting off the blade as it turned and fell. "*Let your heart free and find where you belong*."

Eren and Mikasa shared a quick glance.

"Knife?" Hange frowned.

"Yes, four-eyes, that's a knife," Levi said sarcastically.

Leaves drifted through a charcoal forest as a young Mikasa ran along the banks of the river. "*It's more delicate, more fragile then all life itself*." The knife continued falling, droplets of blood flying from its red-stained blade.

Mikasa tensed slightly, and Eren's nails bit into his palms. *It's not necessary. They said they would only show what was necessary. And that's* not.

"Mikasa?" Sasha said. "Wow, I almost forgot what you looked like with long hair!"

"It was a lot longer back then," Krista said. "It's pretty!"

"Uh, thanks. . ."

Mikasa stumbled to a stop, eyes wide with confusion. "*When I set it free it always comes back to me*." The camera panned around her, showing countless bloody knives stuck into the ground around her. "*So I'll let it find peace in my embrace*."

"Okay. . ." Moblit said. "Make that peaceful with a touch of unsettling."

"It could be a metaphor for her strength. . ?" Krista suggested.

"Yeah," Armin said quickly. "That's definitely what it is."

Droplets of blood flew into the air as Mikasa took a step ack, her dress billowing around her. "*The wish you have, it is fighting through your pounding heart, the thirst in you*." She clenched a knife in her hand and raised it, pointing it ahead. "*It leaves your mind and you forget in time*."

"The lyrics are interesting," Erwin commented. "It almost sounds like she—or, whover's singing the song for her—is speaking to somebody in particular."

More than a few people glanced at Eren, who, as always, remained blissfully clueless.

"*'Till it calls to you once again*." The wind grew stronger, her scarf and sweater were blown away as she looked forwards, eyes dark and dull, now a teenager.

Petra shivered. The imagery, while beautiful, was strangely unsettling. *Charcoal. . . forged from fire and strong in its own way, leaving a mark wherever it goes. But fragile, and wiped away with just a brush of the hand. . .* She shooed the thoughts from her mind, preferring not to think too deeply on what could have easily just been an artistic choice.

It's like the light just disappeared from her eyes. Sasha frowned. *What could have happened?*

The camera drew back, showing her standing in a Walled city, staring from a distance at the military base as two birds flew overhead. "*In this beautiful, cruel world, chilling, and dark, and frightening.*" She looked up, watching the birds fly by, sun shining on her face. "*Are we never to obtain a sign, or a reason why we're still alive?*" She turned, raising a hand to shield her eyes.

"That's kind of depressing," Connie whispered.

"Honestly, if it gets any more darker than episode one, I'll eat my hat," Jean muttered.

"You don't have a hat," Sasha hissed.

"Yeah, that's why I said it—'cause I know for a *fact* it's going to get far, far worse."

"*Stop it, we are weak, 'cause we failed to see that soon in time,*" A young Eren walked out of the Gate, headed towards her. The image changed as he walked, fading into the older, teenaged version of himself, dressed in ODM and a cadet uniform, like Mikasa.

"Wait, she's talking about me?" Eren said, surprised.

Armin sighed, putting his face in his hands.

That puts the lyrics in an even more interesting context, Erwin thought. *Weakness, huh?*

"*They'll be nothing that we can protect,*" He locked eyes with her as he walked, wind buffeting his hair and clothes as he stopped.

"You don't have to protect me," Eren snapped, then softened, remembering his mother's final words to her. "I mean, I can do it myself now, right? I'm a big, strong Titan, remember?"

Annie, Reiner, and Bertolt glanced at each other.

"We're lucky," Reiner whispered. "It doesn't look like the ending's got anything to do with. . . our situation."

"*Nothing but a distant life, we have left behind.*" Mikasa lowered her hands and walked towards him as the camera moved up, the birds flying away as the scene turned back into the starry night sky.

"Distant life," Ymir muttered. "Interesting."

Episode – 2. That Day: The Fall of Shinganshina, Part 2

A black-and-white image of a group of Titans attacking hordes of humans appeared on screen, fading from black as if folded out. "*They first appeared over a hundred years ago. Giant humanoid creatures with a taste for our blood*."

"If you think about it," Armin commented. "The Titans haven't actually been around for that long. Humanity's been trapped in the Walls for a hundred years, now, but, considering how long humans must have lived in the outside world before that, the Titans are fairly recent."

Annie and Reiner shared a look as Hange perked up excitedly. "That's a fair point!" they said.

"How much do you know about the outside world, Armin?" Reiner asked casually.

"Not much," Armin admitted. "Barely anything, really."

The image took on a red tinge as the camera swept to the side, showing humans bearing spears standing against the Titans.

"Well, that ain't gonna do much," Oluo muttered.

"*The brute strength of these aberrations was more than a human many times over*." A sea of humans cowered in a gorge of the Titans walked around and through it, reaching down for the smaller creatures. "*Humanity was shoved to the brink of extinction almost overnight*." Hundreds of thousands of misshapen giants slunk forwards, expressions twisted, bodies unproportioned and horrific.

"Overnight. . ." Sasha muttered, arms prickling with goosebumps.

"Sweet Maria," Moblit said quietly.

The camera swept to the side, showing red Titans standing around a circular, stone Wall. "*The survivors erected three layers of walls: Maria, Rose, and Sina*," Each Wall, along with its emblem, appeared as it was named. "*Withdrawing behind them in relative safety for a hundred years*."

"There ya go!" Jean said. "*Humans* made the Walls, not some freakish god or magical Titan. Show *that* to the Wall Priests."

Bertolt coughed discreetly into his fist, then wheezed when an elbow rammed into his ribs on both sides.

"*However*. . ." Flames swept across the image, transitioning to the opening.

"I'm interested to know," Mike said, "how long this is going to be. I mean, I know this is gonna cover the past and present before we get to the future, but how long exactly is that going to take?"

"Well," Marco reached into his pocket and pulled out a small, dog-eared notebook, flipping through it frantically. "Oh, shit, this isn't my job. . ." he muttered. "Yeah, says here it's supposed to go five years into the future. Don't worry!" he said quickly, noticing the shocked

looks on his friends' faces. "There'll be a bunch of major timeskips, and only the really important events will be covered."

"Oh, thank Fritz," Connie sighed, putting a hand on his chest.

A rat looked up and scrambled over a rock, abandoning the crushed, bloody arm it had been nibbling at. A crow flapped its wings as it landed by a limp leg, shoe stained with red, and began pecking at the fleshy hands.

Krista put a hand over her mouth, squeezing her eyes shut at the sounds of flesh ripping and the wet gulping noises the bird made as it ate away at the limb. Armin supressed a gag, and Sasha turned slightly green, slowly putting her sandwich down and pushing the plate away from her.

Bertolt squeezed his eyes shut, fists shaking in his lap. "It's okay," Reiner whispered, though his own nails were digging into the material of the couch with enough force to rip it. "We did the right thing. We're right." He repeated the words over and over again like a mantra.

Even the veterans, who were more than used to seeing humans eaten—both alive and dead—looked unsettled. Hange looked torn between scientific curiousity and wanting to throw up while Moblit made a gagging motion next to them and Erwin stared ahead, expression cold as stone, and just as hard.

Meanwhile, Levi was thinking about a very different bird.

The crow raised its head, blood soaking the feathers on its face and beak.

Gunther felt his heart sink slightly at the shattered glass and splintered wood leaning against cracked walls in the background. *It took less than a day for the Titans to reduce what humans have been building for a century to rubble and ruins.*

Petra had a similar train of thought going through her mind. *Will we ever be free of them?* she wondered. *Even if we defeat them. . . They're always going to be a stain on our history*.

The bird let out a harsh cry as the camera panned over the destroyed city. Smoke rose from roofs that had caved in on themselves, crushed walls no longer able to hold up the weight of the splintered shingles.

Armin closed his eyes and Mikasa flexed her hands, opening and closing her fists. *Home*, Eren thought. *Will we ever go back? And, even if we do. . . it's never going to be the same, is it?*

"Until then, a man apart from God. O, wretched, was I." A lone priest continued chanting, stumbling back, eyes wide with horror, as screams echoed around him. The ground rumbled with massive footsteps as a blond Titan with vacant, grey eyes plowed forwards, embers drifting through the air.

"Annoying piece of shit," Ymir said loudly, breaking the reverent silence. Krista slapped her arm. "Hey!"

"Don't say that!" Krista said reproachfully, ignoring the urge deep inside her (no, not her, inside *Historia*—Krista wouldn't think such mean things) to agree with the taller girl. "He's going to die!"

"Yeah, I know—and he still thinks some fake gods can save him."

"And driven even as a plough by avarice." More Titans crashed through the ruins which, up until recently, had been a bustling centre of life. "Now, thou behold, am I here punished for it. Punished by the justice of God."

"Pathetic," Levi growled, crossing his arms. "Can't he see the shit going on around him? Chanting isn't gonna make being bitten in half hurt any less."

On the other side of the room, Jean flinched, pressing the side of his arm to Marco's. The dark-haired boy shot him a curious look, but didn't say anything. Annie watched the interaction, face drawn, hands shaking at her sides.

A mother whimpered as she brought her child close to her, cowering behind a bookshelf in the corner of a room as a long-haired Titan walked by, shards of shattered glass in the empty window panes trembling.

The sight brought a fresh wave of grief to Eren and he took a deep, steadying breath. *Don't cry. Not again*.

"Where covetousness leads, thou sees bourn." The missionary continued walking forwards, even as people fled, wailing in terror, in the opposite direction, book clutched tightly in his hands. "Upon the penance of these writhing, the Mountain holds no greater pain." Titans continued pouring in through the breached Wall, flooding through the rubble and flames.

"At this point, I can't tell if he's a believer, or just insane," Connie said quietly—it didn't feel right to him, speaking so plainly while they watched nameless humans dying left and right on the screen, despite the fact that it didn't seem to keep anyone else from speaking their minds.

"Is there a difference, really?" Mike replied.

"As greed has drowned our love for every good and right, so justice here doth chain." A woman rand down an alley, panting, and skidded to a halt, planting the palms of her hands against the building blocking her way. She turned, putting a hand over her mouth, tears pricking the corners of her eyes as she stood shock-still. She gasped as a shadow passed over her and looked up to see a wide-eyed Titan grinning down at her, greasy hair falling around his face.

The music's beautiful, Bertolt thought suddenly. *So calm and peaceful. . . like a melancholic, symphonic lullaby.* There was irony in that, he supposed. He didn't know how he felt about that—all he *did* know was that it definitely didn't match what was happening on screen. He turned his head to the side as another scream rang through the speakers.

We're right. We're right. We're right.

“No!” She screamed as fingers closed almost delicately around her head and lifted her up, feet kicking as she screamed. “Let me go!” One of her shoes landed on the ground as she wailed.

Mikasa closed her eyes for a brief moment. The scene was far too similar to the one that had just occurred with Carla. *And far too soon*. She glanced at Eren, who was staring determinedly at the TV, hands fisted by his sides.

Annie’s donut made a small, squishing noise as it was crushed in her hand. She took a deep breath and wiped the sugar from her fingers. *It doesn’t matter*.

“Tethered, captive, merged with the clay.” Screams of horror and fear sounded through the air as people ran down the red-splattered streets, maneuvering around rocks, buried in the ground as if they’d falling from space—which they might as well have—and fires, still burning, smoke and embers rising into the sky. “And, thus, to remain so long as it pleases the Lord:” A panting man was snatched up by a quick hand as he tried to run and shouted as he was lifted into an air, held up to a face already drenched with blood. “fraught, fixed, earthen in heart and limb.”

“Look at the blood on that lad’s face,” Hange said quietly. “He’s eaten his fill already, hasn’t he? He’ll be vomiting them all up, soon.”

“Hange,” Moblit said, voice barely above a whisper. “Maybe another time.”

A beaming Titan with long brown hair lifted up a writing woman as the priest walked down the street, brandishing his bundle of straw. “What else may heavenly grace do for sins as ours?”

“Fun fact,” Omni said groggily, lifting her head from the back of her seat as if it was made of lead. “That Titan—” she yawned, “—is based off your series’ creator, Isayama himself.”

“So, first, this man, Isayama, *created* this fucked-up world, and then he made himself one of the monsters in it?” Eren demanded, whirling around to stare at Omni in shocked fury. She shrugged, picking up a mug full of a dark, steaming drink from the coffee table (Ymir followed the cup with her eyes, focused on it like a cat and its prey).

“That’s an interesting take, Eren,” Petra commented. “People are monsters, that is.”

Reiner stiffened and Annie fidgeting fingers froze.

The man froze with a horrified gasp as he noticed a flat-faced, bony-limbed Titan looming over the bridge he stood on. “For we lifted not our eye to heights bequeathed. . .” He continued chanting as the Titan’s fist closed around him and lifted him up, the Titan’s golden-eyed gaze peering off into the distance, small, pointy teeth bared. He cut off as a chomping noise ripped through the air and his book landed on the ground, open pages flopping into a pool of blood.

“He was still chanting in the end,” Sasha whispered.

Everybody else was silent. Despite knowing it was coming, it had still jolted them all to the bone to see the man continue speaking in God’s name, even as he was torn in half.

"Called it," Ymir said quietly.

Hannes ran through the gate, still carrying the shell-shocked Mikasa and Eren. Eren's eyes were wide and blank, tears still running down his face. He gasped and turned to look at Hannes, eyes burning with fury.

"Oh, no," Marco muttered, realizing what was about to happen. "Oh, *no*."

"Argh!" Hannes stumbled as Eren slapped him on the head.

"What is it?" Hannes demanded, stopping.

"We couldn't saved her!" Mikasa raised her head to look at Eren as he shouted. "We almost had her out! Why did you interfere?" He raised his fist. "I almost saved my mother!"

He loved her so much. Krista doubted—no, knew—that, if it had been her trapped under that beam, her mother wouldn't even have spared her a second glance. For a moment, she wondered what it would like to love someone so much for grief to turn into madness.

Ymir squeezed her shoulder. "You okay?" she muttered, voice surprisingly—well, not soft, but quiet, at least.

Maybe I do. She nodded. "Yeah."

Eren screamed in grief, slamming his elbow onto the top of Hannes's head.

Sasha winced, rubbing the top of her head sympathetically. "Ouch," she whispered.

"Why the hell would you do that?" Ymir asked. "The guy just saved your ass, and you punch him in the head?"

"I—wasn't thinking straight," Eren admitted, looking down, biting his lip. "All I could think about was, well. . . I'm not really sure what I was thinking, actually."

"*Obviousl*—" Petra slammed her hand over Oluo's mouth before he could finish.

"Enough!" Eren cried out as Hannes jolted his shoulder and threw him forwards. He landed on his stomach on the ground with a grunt.

"Gonna be honest, pal, you kind of deserved that," Connie said quietly.

"Eren!" Mikasa gasped. She struggled free from Hannes's grip and ran forwards to kneel by him.

"Eren." Both children turned around as Hannes walked forwards. "The reason why your mother wasn't saved was because you were weak."

"Jeez," Jean said. "Even *I* think that was too harsh."

Krista nodded. "He just lost his mother and home in one fell swoop. He could have stood to be gentler."

"Well, this is Eren," Sasha offered, chuckling uneasily. "I don't think it would've gotten through to him any other way, honestly."

Hannes knelt in front of Eren, one knee resting in the dirt. Eren's eyes widened and he ground his teeth. He lunged forwards with a cry, swinging a fist forwards.

Hannes caught his arm easily, the child's hand impossibly small compared to his. "I. . ." Eren wrenched his arm, but Hannes didn't budge as he looked down, eyes shadowed.

Eren winced as he watched himself struggle against the soldier. *I was grieving, I was angry. . . but, still. He didn't need to save us.* He flicked his tongue over dry lips. *Have I always been like this?*

"The reason why I wasn't able to stand up to the Titan. . ." He looked up, eyes wide, a river of tears running down his cheeks. "Was because I didn't have the courage!"

"Honesty is the best policy," Levi mumbled. Petra sighed, dropping her face in her palm.

"At least he didn't try to sound more noble," Hange said. "The truth was probably the best thing to say in that situation."

Eren inhaled as he looked up, his own face wet. Hannes squeezed his eyes shut with a quiet sob and Eren froze, eyes wide. He looked up as Hannes stood and followed limply behind him as the soldier moved to take Mikasa's hand. "I'm sorry."

Shit. Eren felt a tear roll down his face, landing with a small *splat* on his wrist.

Mikasa closed her eyes, tugging her scarf a bit tighter. *I want to help him. How? How, when he won't even let me in?*

Eren grit his teeth, closing his eyes as he followed Hannes. Mikasa followed, face down. She winced and pressed a hand to her forehead. The scene changed, images of a dark-haired woman lying on the ground in a pool of blood, open eyes dull and unfocused, and a blond man, slumped against the wall, stomach soaked in red, flashed onto the screen.

Sasha jumped. "Eek!"

"What's that?" Jean asked, more curious than rude. "I mean, Christ, Mikasa, don't tell me you've got the nutty dreams, too." He frowned, glancing at her when he received no answer. "Mika—" He cut off at the sight of Armin shaking his head furiously, chopping his hand in front of his throat.

Mikasa stared at the screen, eyes wide, face drained of colour. *Why?* Her heart pounded. *Why is* that *there? It shouldn't—it's not—*

"It's okay," Eren whispered, goosebumps springing up on the back of her neck as his breath tickled her ear. "It's okay. It doesn't have anything to do with the Titans—"

"That's where you're wrong," another whisper joined in the conversation. The siblings jumped, whirling around to come face-to-face with Omni, who had seemingly appeared behind the couch.

"What did you say?" Eren demanded, though the bite to his voice was slightly dampened by the fact that he was leaning back, looking unnerved. Omni's eyes, pupilless as they were, were impossible to follow—while her face was mere centimetres from his, he couldn't shake the feeling that she wasn't looking at him.

"Wrong," she replied. "There's a lot more to your world than you think." Without another word, she turned and marched back to her loveseat, pulling out a small, rectangular object from her pocket as she flopped onto it and tapping its surface—screen—frantically.

She turned, bottom half of her face hidden by her scarf, to look behind her. *It happened again*.

Ah, Erwin thought grimly. *So, it's* that. He sighed, thinking of Omni's words—based on what the Spirit had said, he found it extremely unlikely that they *wouldn't* see the event. *And in great detail, too, I'd guess.* He shook his head. *This won't be pretty*.

Gentle piano music played as a man screamed, falling on his stomach. Massive fingers closed around his torso, picking him up as he sobbed.

"The music really is beautiful," Bertolt muttered.

"What?" Hange glanced at him.

"Uh—!" He flushed, a bead of sweat racing down the side of his face as their piercing red eyes bore into his own. "I'm just saying that the, uh, music's, you know, nice?"

"Huh!" Hange tapped their pen against their chin. "I get your point—it is pretty groovy."

"Personally, I find it quite enjoyable," Erwin commented. "More than the events, certainly," he added with a small grimace.

"Hurry up!" the sandy-haired Garrison soldier who'd teased Eren with Hannes during the first episode shouted as people ran past him. "Go to the Inner Gate!"

"Get on the boats to escape!" The camera panned away, showing hordes of people gathered on the docks as soldiers filled the ferries. "Hurry, or you'll get eaten!"

The gears rumbled as they began turning, and the first boat began cruising down the river, a light trail of rippled dragging behind it as it pulled itself down the cable.

"The boats were a major problem with evacuating the cities," Mike said with a small sigh. "They're meant for day trips, not large-scale emergency transportation."

"Good point," Hange said. "I'm sure that, with the proper technology, we could design some better transportation inaccessible by the Titans. . ." they trailed off, mumbling under their breath as their pen began flying across the page.

The camera moved up into the sky, and the Wall changed into a flickering, black-and-white diagram. "*Outlier Districts like Shinganshina were designed to attract the Titans to specific spots along Wall Maria*," the narrator explained. Titans, red blemishes on the otherwise monochrome landscape, approached the District. "*Their function is to streamline security.*

"Red heads," Jean said suddenly.

"What?" Sasha, Petra, and Hange asked.

"No, not *that*," Jean said, flushing slightly. "Red *heads*. The emblem of Wall Maria is red, just like the Titans. Everything else is grey."

“Really!” Hange said. “That’s interesting.”

Moblit nodded. “It’s like they’re suggesting a connection between the Walls and the Titans.” Reiner turned white, and Annie began shovelling handfuls crackers into her mouth.

“If so, what could it be?” Eld asked.

“Who knows?” Gunther shrugged.

“I mean, it could just be a design choice,” Sasha said.

“Or maybe they’re just coloured to draw attention,” Eren said. “Either way, we’ll know, soon.”

The image faded into the real Wall Maria, the Goddess’s face cold and uncaring from where it sat, carved into the brick of the Gate. “*Intentionally built in this design was a flaw, where the citizens of Shinganshina could only escape through a single Gate*.”

“So, basically, they planned the citizen’s deaths,” Levi said bluntly.

“Captain!” Petra, Gunther, and Eld hissed together, while Oluo made a motion that seemed to be trapped between a nod and a facepalm.

“Well, it’s true,” Levi said. “And not a bad tactic, either. The Titans, even the Abnormals, would be focused on the people grouped in the District, giving the soldiers time to close the Gates and fight back.” Mikasa grit her teeth, clenching her teacup tightly.

“Yeah, well, that would’ve worked, if it weren’t for that plated bastard,” Ymir said. Reiner forced himself to look normal as her gaze flicked over to him for the briefest of moments.

A Garrison soldier threw a bag off the side of the boarding plank he stood on, and it landed in the ditch with a *thud*. “No personal belongings! We need to make as much room as possible!”

“Not that it worked,” Eren said quietly, remembering the desperate gazes of the people on the docks as they’d drifted slowly down the river.

Armin stood on the deck of the ship, frowning as he looked into the crowds of people. “Armin,” his grandfather said, glancing over at him. “Take a seat.”

“But Eren and Mikasa are still out there,” Armin protested. He started, looking back up. “There!” Hannes spoke with the soldier standing at the edge of the dock, Eren and Mikasa in front of him. Armin raised his arm, ready to wave, then faltered, brow furrowing at the sight of his friends: Eren’s eyes were wide, expression shadowed, staring blankly ahead, as if he didn’t even register the people around him; Mikasa had hidden her face with her scarf and kept her face down, eyes covered with her hair. “Eren. . .” Hannes ushered the two forwards and they stepped onto the boat in a trancelike state.

“Where’s your grandfather, now?” Connie asked.

Armin looked down at the pear in his hand. “Dead,” he said simply. “In the Reclamation Operation.”

“Oh,” Connie said awkwardly, looking down. “Sorry.”

Mike winced and Levi looked down at his hands, jaw clenched. Erwin stared ahead stonily, fingernails digging grooves in his apple.

"I wouldn't try to call out just now," Mr. Arlert said, looking down, brow furrowed, eyes hard. "Who knows what they've just seen."

"Heh?" Armin turned back to look at him.

He has no idea, Petra thought sadly. *He will soon, though*.

"Hurry up!" The sandy-haired soldier backed up, slashing his hands through the air as a man rushed through the Gate. "Get out of here!" he cried, standing in front of two cannons.

"Huh," Levi muttered. "Guess he wasn't so useless, after all."

There was a rumbling noise as a Titan stepped forwards from behind a building. Dust billowed through the air as it crashed through an archway as if it was made of nothing, decimated bricks crumbling to the ground. The soldier stepped back with a terrified gasp, eyes widening. "Hurry!" he shouted. "They're right in front of us!" The camera moved over the Wall, dipping down to show citizens screaming as they raced for the boats.

"Cannons," Moblit sighed. "A good effort, but nowhere near good enough."

"Especially not from the ground," Mike added.

"Cannons, with nearly no effect, or ODM, which I bet my ass most of them haven't used for years," Oluo said. "Not much of a choice, there."

A soldier beckoned others forwards as they rolled cannons down the streets. Hannes panted, out of breath, in a side alley, before running forwards.

The camera moved over the docks, crowded to the point of them just being a sea of heads and into the boat, where Eren and Mikasa sat, squeezed between other people like sardines in a can, backs to the ship's bridge.

There are so many bags in the ditch, Annie thought. For some reason, that hit her harder than the masses of people crowded on the dock and in the boats. *How many families torn apart? How many lives destroyed?* She closed her eyes.

Don't think about it like that, she chided herself. *Don't make it personal. You just did your job. And you did it damn well*.

Sasha's nails dug into her palms at the sight of the Garrison soldiers standing in front of the boats, arms held out to keep the citizens from flooding into the boats. She closed her eyes, thinking of the way she'd spat at her father about the refugees. *I was so stupid*.

"This can't be happening," somebody muttered.

"Oh, God, please," a girl whimpered. The occupants of the boat suddenly gasped as shouts rang through the air.

"Hey!" a man screamed, pushing against a Garrison soldier as two more lifted the boarding plank. "What are you doing?"

Petra clenched her fists. *I can't even begin to realize how they felt*. She imagined standing on a dock, amidst a burning city, watching as her only hope for escape drifted slowly away. She took a deep, shuddering breath. *Why did this happen?*

"It's at full capacity!" the soldier shouted back. "It must depart!"

"Please, at least have our children on board!" a woman pleaded.

Children. Reiner squeezed his eyes shut. *No. They're not the same. Devils. Devils, all of them. They deserved it. All of it*.

They did. . ?

"There's nothing we can do!" the soldier said, arms held out to keep the crowds from jumping on the boat. "Depart!" he shouted over his shoulder. The gears rolled to life with a rumble and began turning, dragging the boat through the water.

"Let me on!" a woman screeched.

"Let me on!" The cry was echoed through the thousands of people as the boat rolled away, dragging a lazy wake behind it as it passed by at the pace of a snail, the people on the dock forced to watch as it moved by, impossibly slow and close, but unattainably far.

The fact that it moved so slowly makes it all the worse, Jean thought. *They had to stand there and watch as it snailed its way down the river. It's worse than torture—they had minutes to watch it leave, to watch it move, knowing that they could have made it on*. . . His chest gave a painful twinge and he closed his eyes. *Goddamnit! It isn't supposed to be like this. . .*

A man cried out as he shoved past a soldier and raced forwards, leaping across the ditch and grabbing onto the side of the boat. Another man followed his lead but cried out as his grip slipped and he fell, landing in the ditch.

"They're slowing it down," Moblit whispered. "The boats weren't made to carry so many people, and the refugees on board are already pushing it. Each person that jumps on board just puts strain on the mechanism and increases the chance of all of them being caught and eaten."

"Those two. . ." Hange traced a finger over their lips. "The Colossal and Armoured. . . I wonder if they know what they brought on these people? They do have intelligence, don't they?" They suddenly trembled. "If I could get my hands on them. . . oh, the experiments."

Bertolt's hands shook and Reiner seized his forearm, grip tight, face pale. *It's fine*, his eyes seemed to say. *It's fine. We're fine. They don't know. They'll* never *know. There's no way they could*.

Eren's eyes were wide and unseeing as he listened to the people struggling to get on.

A sudden bang echoed through the air as the camera panned up the Wall. People turned, looking up with gasps as columns of black smoke rose into the sky from the other side of the Wall.

A Titan walked through the town, seemingly unfazed by the bursts of smoke rising around it as cannonballs were fired at it left and right. "What are you aiming at, you idiot!" the sandy-haired soldier snarled.

“These things weren’t designed for moving targets!” a dark-haired man protested as another Titan walked forwards to join the other.

“Yet another issue,” Moblit muttered.

“They would have had better chances aiming from the top of the Wall,” Eld said.

“It doesn’t matter!” The camera moved over the town, showing the countless Titans milling through it, some feasting, others wandering aimlessly about. “Hurry, and get it reloaded!”

“What’s the point?” the other man screeched.

“The point?” Gunther hissed. “The *point?* The same fucking point we’ve been fighting for for a hundred years!”

“Useless shits,” Oluo sneered. “They think they’re so high and mighty every time they mock us, talking about how useless we are, but they’re doing exactly what they sneered at.”

“We may lose comrades every time we leave the Walls, but at least we actually *do* something!” Eld growled.

There was a rumbling noise as the chains creaked and began moving, the face of Maria lowering as they began closing the Gate. “Huh?!”

The sandy-haired man turned around with a gasp. “No—the Gate!”

Another soldier turned slowly. “We’re. . .” he broke into a run, “getting left behind!” More soldiers followed after him.

“And now they run,” Oluo growled. “Of course.”

“Hey!” the sandy-haired man shouted.

“I can’t really blame them,” Sasha said quietly. “I mean—they’ve never seen a Titan, *really* seen one, up close. Most of them are probably still drunk, and this is the first time the Wall’s ever been breached in recorded history. I’d be scared too.”

“Yeah,” Connie said. “I mean, I know how they feel. None of us were expecting Trost.”

Bertolt noticed Jean glancing at Marco and bit his lip, nails pressing painfully at his palms.

Rusted metal gears turned, creaking against each other, as a Garrison soldier pushed a crank frantically. “Wait!” Hannes protested. “Don’t shut it yet!” He stood in the gatehouse, arguing with another, dark-haired, soldier. “We’ve still got a lot of people left out there!”

“They wouldn’t, would they?” Connie asked, even though he knew full well what the answer would be.

“They have to,” Moblit said sadly. “The longer the keep it open, the higher the risk of Titans getting in grows.”

“But. . . the *people*,” Krista said quietly.

"I know how you feel," Eld told her. "But you've seen what the Titans can do, haven't you? Maybe if we hadn't been weakened by the Expedition, we could have helped, but. . ." he shrugged, looking away.

"We can't let the Titans get through the Inner Gate!" the soldier shot back. "If that happens, the handful of lives left out there will be the least of our problems!" Hannes put his fists on his hips and the dark-haired man threw out a hand in frustration. "Humanity will be pushed back to the next Wall!"

"But that's no reason to leave all these people to die!" Hannes shouted.

"Actually, that's a very good reason," Hange said quietly, doodling in the margins of their notebook.

"He's letting his personal feelings and beliefs blind him," Erwin said. "By closing the Gate and sacrificing those civilians still in Shinganshina, they effectively save the rest of humanity. But, of course, it's not always an easy choice to make," he added fairly, frowning at the screen.

"Not that it'll help," Levi said dryly. "'Cause that ugly, armoured bastard just had to rear his shitty head." Reiner flinched.

Another soldier skidded to a halt at the door of the gatehouse. "Hurry and close it!" he shouted as another man ran after him, stumbling and crashing into the wall.

"The Titans are coming!" the other man reported.

The man Hannes had been arguing with whirled around. "Hurry and close the gate!" he ordered. The chains clinked as the Gate began closing faster.

Hannes gasped. "No!" he cried, rearing forwards, then gasped as he was suddenly yanked back. "Oi!" he shouted as the two other soldiers grabbed onto his arms. "Come on!"

Mike sighed. *He has a good heart, but he doesn't have half the will it takes to be a soldier. Not in these times, anyways*.

"The others are so ready to just up and kill everyone without ODM in Shinganshina," Ymir remarked dully. "Not sure if that's cowardice, or if I should be concerned."

He inhaled sharply, eyes widening, as a loud *thump* rang through the town. The soldiers froze, staring up at the ceiling as the earth shook.

Armin flinched and Eren inhaled sharply. Mikasa closed her eyes, tilting her face slightly to the ceiling, remembering what had happened next.

Reiner clenched his fists. "Devils," he whispered, quiet enough that not even Annie or Bertolt could hear him. "Devils, all of them." *All Eldians are Devils*. "I'm good.

"We're good."

In the boat, Eren gasped, looking up as the noises sounded all the way to the other side of the Wall. A Garrison soldier on the ground looked on in horror as a massive, plated foot slammed into the ground, sending dirt and rubble flying.

Mike was silent, mouth a thin, tight line, expression grim, as he realized that they were getting—literal—front row seats to the worst catastrophe to ever occur in humanity's history."

The earth shook with every step the Titan took as it walked through the town, passing crumpled buildings and flames flickering in the streets. It stopped, and the camera moved up, showing the full body of the Armored Titan.

"Look at all that shit," Hange muttered, sitting up a bit straighter. "That beautiful, *beautiful* armour. My, that's got to be heavy! Hm." They tapped their chin. "Wonder if that steams away when it dies?" The corner of their lip twitched. "Oh, if I could get my hands on that beauty. . ." Their fingers jerked, and Reiner jolted, leaning back as if he'd been shocked.

"What the fuck?" Ymir muttered, visibly unsettled, running a hand over the back of her neck. "Freaking psycho," she added under her breath.

"That's not. . . nice," Krista said weakly, watching uneasily as Hange wiped away a line of drool, their cheeks taking on a faint pink hue.

The stunned soldiers stepped back as they stared at the ironclad behemoth. The Titan leaned back, armor creaking as it rubbed against itself, and leaned down into a running position, monstrous fists clenched, muscles tensed, arms out.

"That's a very human move," Hange thought suddenly. "The pose and all."

"That's true," Moblit said. "What do you reckon?"

"Maybe it really *is* intelligent," Hange mused, leaning closer to the TV. "Oh, this is fantastic!" They let out a slightly hysterical laugh and Reiner fanned himself discreetly, sweat beading on his forehead.

A great foot kicked up dirt as it charged forwards, tiles being ripped from roofs from the force of it as it sped down the street, each massive footstep spurring a small earthquake. "What is that?" The sandy-haired man leaned back with a high, squeaky gasp of horror as the Armored ran down the street, eyes blazing. "He's. . ." He grit his teeth and pointed forwards. "Fire!"

"It's fast," Armin said. "You wouldn't think so, with all its armour, but it is."

"I doubt it has much endurance, though," Erwin said. "It probably uses short bursts of speed, and then burns out."

The cannons jerked as ammunition was fired at the Armored, and the camera zoomed forwards from the inside of one of the barrels, following the perspective of a cannonball as it flew at the Titan. There was a crackling explosion as it slammed into its shoulder.

Reiner winced, rubbing his shoulder, and Ymir whistled.

The wound didn't deter the Armored—rather, it spurred it on, and the Titan began running faster, steam rising from its damaged shoulder. "Huh?" the soldier demanded, leaning back.

"Damn, that thing's tough," Connie said.

"Indeed," Hange said. "Hm, I wonder. . . supposing the plating doesn't steam away after being taken off the Titan—or it dies—it could easily be used for making weapons, shields, or other stuff like that." They clapped happily. "Oh, I'd love to try that out!"

Reiner paled. "Goddamned monster," he breathed quietly.

"It has no effect!" Another man shouted.

The ground rumbled as the Armored rocket past another, smaller Titan, which was felled quickly, arms flopping, as a cannonball tore through its stomach.

"Ouch," Sasha muttered, rubbing her own abdomen.

"It's a monster!" a soldier, turning and bolting for the Gate, knocking into the sandy-haired soldier.

"Retreat!" he turned, running after the others as the Armored gained, tsunamis of dirt being sprayed into the air behind it. The soldier reached forwards desperately to the Gate. "The Titan is coming!" The Gate lowered. "It's charging in!" Soldiers and civilians alike screamed as they ran through the Gate, tumbling on the ground, screaming as they rushed to escape the Armored. "Hurry and close the gate!"

"No use, now," Mike muttered. Armin winced.

Reiner grit his teeth. *You did well*, he told himself. *They're just devils—they wouldn't hesitate to tear us apart. You're a good Eldian*. He took a deep breath. *You did good.*

The camera zoomed around the Armored as it puffed steam out from its nostrils and gave another great burst of speed. There was an almighty *crash* as the Armored hurled itself through the Gate, chunks of stone flying through the air around it. Soldiers tumbled through the air, carried away by the force of the flying rubble, eyes wide, unable to even scream.

Sasha squeezed her eyes shut. *It had been hard the first time, but now. . .* She shuddered, imagining all the thousands of people inside Wall Maria who had no idea they'd just lost everything. *If I'd known about. . .* this *back then, I wouldn't have dared talk shit like that.*

The Armored skidded to a halt, heels and fist digging into the ground, kicking up a spray of suffocating dust behind it. It raised its head slowly, one arm still in the air, and the camera moved to show the gaping hole in the wall behind it as dust billowed out from its crash zone.

"Goddamned bastard," Eren said quietly.

Hannes stood with two other trembling soldiers as they stared at the destroyed Gate in horror. He turned, staring at the crushed rubble inside the tunnel, still steaming from being torn through. "The Gate. . ."

The Armored raised its head and opened its mouth, plating on its jaw sliding away to reveal a row of perfectly straight, square teeth. It growled as fire blew from its mouth, engulfing the area around it in flames.

Hange sat up straight, eyes widening. *That's new*.

People stood on the boats, watching, almost awestruck with horror, as thick, black smoke rose from the city. Eren's eyes were wide as he watched the Armored stand up.

"That *thing* just destroyed a third of humanity," Eren hissed, familiar anger flooding him at the sight of the creature as it surveyed the area around it. "I hope it's fucking pleased with itself."

Reiner clenched his fists, nails digging into his palms. *Good Eldian. Good Eldian. Good Eldian*.

They're just devils.

Humanity's Area of Activity, Part 1

This diagram illustrates the size of humanity's territory. Anything beyond Wall Maria remains a mystery.

"The Walls aren't perfectly round!" Sasha said, surprised. "They're sorta. . . I dunno, wiggly?"

"Well, yeah," Ymir snorted. "Did you actually think that someone drew a bunch of big-ass circles on the ground and built them like that?"

"Well, no," Sasha grinned sheepishly, embarrassed. "But, I mean. . . they're always round in diagrams, aren't they?"

"Look at that big unknown sign outside Wall Maria," Eld said, almost reverently.

"There's so much out there," Petra sighed, resting her chin in her hands. "I hope we'll be able to get back out there someday."

Humanity's Area of Activity, Part 2

Elevation increases as one approaches the epicenter of human territory. It is replete with many resources.

"Well, I never knew that," Jean said, surprised. "That's pretty cool."

"So, basically, humanity's territory is just one huge mountain?" Mike stroked his chin. "I don't recall ever learning that."

"They probably thought it wasn't important for us to know," Moblit reasoned. "After all, it's just a geographical feature, isn't it?"

"No wonder all the rich pigs in Sina are rolling around in gold," Levi scowled. "They're taking shits right on top of all the resources in the fucking Walls." *And that's not all they're shitting on*.

"*Southern part of Wall Maria.*" The camera panned over the broken Wall. "*A few hours after Shinganshina was compromised, the news of the destruction spread quickly to all quadrants of humanity's domain*." The camera moved in the sky over the rich, rolling farmlands of Wall Maria, now abandoned and covered with a thick layer of smog, then down the river as it wound its way to Wall Rose.

"Not fast enough, not nearly." Erwin shook his head. "Nobody was expecting it. It was like all of humanity was in shock."

Annie dragged her nails down her arm, fist clenched. *Not all of it*.

South side of Wall Rose, Trost District.

"Is it true?" somebody asked as the camera moved up, the military base in the centre of Trost shining like a beacon in the light of the setting sun. "Has Shinganshina fallen to the Titans?"

Dimo Reeves leaned forwards, a bead of sweat on his cheek. "I don't believe it. Those Walls were impenetrable for a hundred years. Why now?"

"What a fat pig," Levi sneered.

"Oh," Mikasa said suddenly, frowning. "It's *him*."

"You know him?" Erwin glanced at her.

"Sort of." She was scowling, arms crossed, fists clenched. "He was blocking the Gate during the Battle of Trost. We lost a good many comrades because of him."

"I think I read about that in a report," Mike said, scratching his cheek. "You scared him off, didn't you?" She nodded. "Well, good on you."

A bearded man in red finery glanced over his shoulder from where he'd been standing, looking out the window. "It doesn't matter if you believe it or not," he said. "Refugees are flooding in." He turned around, frowning. "There have been at least five hundred accounted for in the boats."

Five hundred out of a few thousand, Jean thought, and, for a moment, it felt like the world had flipped upside down as his head spun. *That's. . . impossible*. He'd heard about it, of course—listened to his parents discuss it late at night, read about it in newspapers, learned about it in the Cadets, even met and trained with the refugees themselves. But seeing it, and directly witnessing the aftermath was something completely different altogether. *It's almost like a dream. But it's not. It's real*.

"The question is if they will strike again," a blond man with a pointy beard said, a hand to his forehead.

A chill suddenly raced down his spine, and Marco whirled around to see Annie staring at him, eyes boring a hole in the back of his neck. She whipped around to stare determinedly at the TV, leaving Marco to gape at the blonde, utterly confused.

"You good?" Jean asked quietly, glancing at him.

He nodded, the back of his neck still tingling, something niggling at the back of his mind—something important, something that he just couldn't remember. "Fine," he lied, smiling.

A brown-haired merchant with a thick, curled mustache looked up at the man by the window. "How could they have penetrated through Wall Maria?" he asked.

"Big-ass Titans," Levi sighed, uncrossing his arms and reaching for a cup of tea.

The silence in the dark room was broken by the blond man turning around and placing both hands on the table. "Whatever the case, we must contact the Capital and await orders. We aren't able to handle this scale of an emergency." Reeves nodded.

"Listen to them talk." To everybody's, including his own, surprise, it was Bertolt that spoke. "It's like they don't even care. Like the Marians are just numbers on a page."

"Well, they don't know about the fall of Wall Maria yet," Mike offered. "They think it's just Shinganshina. And, well, unfortunately, it's like this a lot."

"For businessmen and the government, that's exactly what's happening," Hange said. "They can't afford to think of it as individual people. It's all just numbers and money to them."

Ymir sneered. "I doubt any of them even care. I mean, if Mr. Reeves over there was willing to risk all of Trost just to get a cart past a Gate, then they're clearly lacking in more than just health."

"Pardon me!" The merchants turned as a Garrison soldier threw the door open. "I just arrived," he said. "Wall Maria has been breached. The Titans have entered!" The merchants gasped in horror.

"And, suddenly, it's real," Gunther sighed.

Hannes stood on a roof, one sword out, watching as hordes of Titans rolled into Maria. He stared, eyes wide, face pale, spots of blood on his jacket, and a large red stain across his stomach. "This is the end," he said quietly.

Eren winced at the sight of the blood running down the side of his face and neck—no doubt flowing from the wound Eren had caused on the top of his head. *He save our lives, and I gave him a disadvantage on the battlefield*. He decided to find a way to thank him the moment they left the rooms—if he couldn't do it personally, he could at least send a letter.

"We're all dead," someone in the boat whispered, eyes wide as he stared at the ground, hands fisted in his hair as other passengers stared at the smoke rising into the sky, the echoes from the Titans' footsteps echoing across the Wall. "Humanity will be eaten by Titans again."

If everything'd gone as planned, that's what would *have happened*. Reiner closed his eyes. *Damn this. Damn the TV. Damn the Web. And, most importantly, damn the fucking Homepage*.

A short-haired woman sat next to him, eyes squeezed tightly shut, hands clasped together in front of her as she prayed quietly, and a young man sitting in front of them stared ahead blankly, tears flowing steadily down his face.

The sky's so beautiful, Petra thought suddenly as she stared at the sunset—yellow bled into orange, which, itself, turned into a deep purple, finally darkening into a dark blue, clouds drifting past in whatever sunlight still peeked over the Wall. *It's almost cruel, how lovely everything is*.

Eren's eyes were wide, and tears formed in them as he stared ahead, the light from the setting sun reflected in his iris. *We're finished*. He blinked, thinking back to him and Mikasa returning home for dinner earlier that day. *I can never go back to my home*. He thought of Carla walking up to him, tugging his ear and scolding him teasingly about the firewood.

Eren clenched his fists, heart pounding, head spinning. *I ruined it*, he thought. *I was such a self-centred brat. I watched her get eaten alive in front of me, and the last thing we ever did was fight*. He reached up, tugging furiously at his hair, the already messy locks springing into enthusiastic cowlicks. *Why? If I hadn't ran, then, maybe, we could have run together. And, if not, then, at least, we could have died together—*

"Eren," Mikasa said sharply, as if she could read his mind. Eren glanced at her, and she eased his hands from the death grip on his hair. She put a hand on his shoulder, squeezing, and he nodded.

A tear traced down his cheek. *Why?* He squeezed is eyes shut, remembering Carla seizing his shoulders after learning of his desire to become a Scout. *Why did I have to argue over something so banal?* Eren turned away from Carla after shouting at her and raced down the street. *Now Mom's dead*. He thought of Carla's smiling face, lit up under the sun as she stood in the kitchen. *She'll never*. . . The Smiling Titan lifted her limp corpse up. *Come back!* Carla smiled as she wiped at Eren's face with a napkin, golden eyes warm and loving.

Jean turned away, juice running down her wrist as she clenched her apple tightly. He thought of her own mother, remembering every insult he'd ever hurled at her and every petty argument they'd ever had. He imagined how he would have felt, had it been his mother trapped under that beam, his mother snapped in half and bitten into like a lump of bread. He felt a wave of empathy for Eren roll over him, as every screaming fit and rage-induced fight over the years suddenly made a lot more sense.

Blood sprayed through the air as the Titan bit through her torso. *Why?*

"*You weren't strong enough*." He thought of Hannes holding him back easily, proving his point without even meaning to.

Eren grit his teeth. *He was right. I was too weak then, and, even now. . . eaten during my first fight, and not even able to keep control as a Titan*. He clenched his fists. *Come on! I'm supposed to be Humanity's Hope, and I can barely even swing a fist!*

***Because I. . . humans are too weak* He wrapped his arms tightly around himself, tears dribbling into his lap, jaw clenched as he sat in the shadows of the boat. *Can the weak do nothing but cry?* He opened his eyes slowly, staring down into his hand, blistered and bloodied by the deep cuts from the beam. A tear fell into his shaking palm, blending into the dried red stains.**

His hands haven't healed. Hange's pencil perked up in their hand. *Either he's too focused on the grief, and his healing powers haven't caught up yet, or*. . . Their breathing began growing

faster as they flipped through the pages of their notebook, scrawling in whatever margins weren't full of calculations or doodles. *Could it be?*

Reiner nudged Annie in the side, nodding at the scientist as they inhaled sharply, eyes widening. "Trouble?" he asked quietly.

The glare she shot him was enough to sear meat. "If it is, then it's your job to clean it up," she hissed back, near silent.

He took a deep, shuddering breath and looked up, eyes cold, pupils contracted with fury. He clenched his fist, hand shaking. Mikasa turned, looking up as he walked past, fists held tightly at his sides. "Huh?"

"Those Titans. . ." She stood as he walked to the side of the boat.

"Ah," Ymir said quietly. "So here's where it starts."

"Eren."

"What's wrong, Eren?" Armin asked, putting a hand on his shoulder. Eren snarled, shoving him roughly away. "Eren!"

He slammed his hands down onto the side of the boat, torn nails digging into the wood.

"Fucking dumbass," Jean said, though not completely unkindly, shaking his head. "You might have shitty amazing healing powers, but that doesn't mean you should try to make your injuries worse every few minutes."

He looked up, eyes shadowed by his hair, tears flowing down his chin, falling into the river below. "I'm going to kill them all," he vowed. Armin gasped, eyes widening. Eren's eyes were bright with hatred as he glared ahead, unseeing and furious. "Every single one!" he swore.

"His eyes," Eld said quietly. "They're so. . . bright." *Almost scarily so*.

Armin stared, eyes wide. "Eren. . ."

The boat continued moving slowly down the river, the fading sunlight retreating as they sailed into shadow.

Armin remembered the boat ride—it had, in his opinion, been worse than the initial attack. It had been stifling silent, save for the sobs and quiet prayers of the people they'd been packed in with. On occasion, there had been Titans on the banks of the river, watching as the package meal lazed by, still, unmoving silhouettes in the black of night.

Shadows of clouds drifted over Shinganshina, plumes of smoke still rising from the destroyed city. "*The Central Government decreed all mankind retreat behind Wall Rose*." The camera panned around a mountain, the forest floor dappled with sunlight as it shone through the branches of countless pine trees. "*Estimates held that nearly ten thousand livers were lost*." A horse-drawn carriage raced down a dirt road cut between trees, the animal's hooves clip-clopping against the hard ground while the wheels clattered on the uneven earth.

"What?" Oluo gaped. "What kind of rich idiot's driving *towards* Wall Maria in this kind of situation?"

***Eren*. Grisha sat in the driver's seat, knuckles white as he clenched the reins, teeth gritted, eyes wide. *Carla. Mikasa*. He clenched his jaw, tears in the corners of his eyes. *Please be alive!* The tears broke free, running down his cheeks.**

"Dad!" Eren gasped. "He—"

"He came back for us." Mikasa stared at the screen, eyes wide. "But, why—with his status, he could've easily found us. How come. . ?" she trailed off.

"I mean, maybe he was delayed?" Sasha suggested. "There must have been a lot of injured people."

"Maybe," Erwin. He had a sinking feeling that it was nowhere near that easy—both in function and for his children.

"—en!" A spark lit up the black screen. "Eren!" Faint shouts were heard as the spark grew into an unfocused flame.

"Huh?" Gunther frowned.

"This better not be another dream sequence," Ymir grimaced. "I nearly hurled last time."

"Eren!" Eren, his face tinged with pink, furrowed his brow, eyes closed.

"Sorry, Ymir," Eren winced, embarrassed despite his lack of control and memory of the event. "Uh, maybe there's a trash can somewhere?"

"Stop it!" Eren's cries were heard. "Stop, Father!" A hand brandished a syringe, drops of fluid flying from the needle. "What are you trying to do?" Grisha's wild, senseless face was shown for a moment before the camera whirled wildly, red light blazing through black branches.

"What?" Eren sat up straight.

"Dr. Jaeger?" Armin's jaw dropped. "But—"

"Oh, shit," Annie muttered.

"Just stick out your arm!" The flame flickered on the black screen.

"No!" Eren wailed. "You've lost your mind since Mom's death!" A chime rang out and Eren's key, shining under the pink light, appeared, turning slowly on its cord.

"The key," Erwin said. He frowned. *Eren had the key when we met him. Something here doesn't add up*. He rubbed his forehead. *I'm missing something*.

"Eren!" Grisha yelled.

"Let me go!" The syringe flashed on screen, and Eren furrowed his brow in his sleep, a bead of sweat on his temple.

"Maybe it's just a nightmare?" Connie suggested weakly.

“Seriously? I doubt even Eren could come up with something as fucked up as this.” Jean shook his head. “Nah. I think this really happened.”

“But I don’t *remember* it!” Eren clenched his fist, frustration piling up inside him.

“Well, *try!*”

“It’s all for your sake!” The key turned against the black background. Grisha raised his arm, swinging down wildly.

“Something’s happening,” Eld said. “Something important. Specific.”

“You don’t say,” Levi muttered. “The key keeps showing up: that’s gotta be the linchpin.”

“What are you saying?” Eren cried, legs flailing, fingers digging into the dirt.

“Don’t forget the way to the key!” The key flashed on screen again and Eren jolted as the needle broke skin. “It’s the way to the truth!” Eren kicked out as the trees overhead flashed again. “One day you’ll understand!” The images flashed over each other in a dizzying, seizure-inducing mix, and the key fell to the ground as a bell began ringing.

“The truth. . .” Erwin muttered. Bertolt and Reiner shared a mildly panicked glance.

“What the hell’s happening?” Armin demanded. “That isn’t like Dr. Jaeger at all!”

“If I had to guess,” Hange said. “I’d say this is when he became a Titan Shifter.”

Everybody whipped around to stare at them. “What do you mean?” Mike asked.

“Think about it,” they said. “When he and Mikasa were trying to lift the beam—” both of them bit their lips, looking down. “Uh, sorry guys—but when they were lifting it, we saw very clearly that Eren was injured. When we were doing our tests, injuries like that tended to heal very quickly, but he was still bleeding on the boat, almost an hour later.”

“You think I *became* a Shifter?” Eren asked. “Well, I guess that makes more sense than me just being born one.”

“If that’s the case,” Erwin mused. “Then I guess the key to turning into a Titan is in whatever Grisha injected Eren with. I don’t suppose you can give us any answers, can you?” he asked, glancing at Omni, who was lounging on her chair, tossing grapes into the air and catching them in her mouth.

She glanced at him. “Nope.” She flung another grape into the air, catching it in her mouth with a *thwock*. Bertolt breathed a minute sigh of relief.

Eren’s eyes widened with a gasp. The bells in the bell tower swung back and forth as sunlight streamed through the windows of the warehouse, dust particles dancing through the air.

“Eren,” Mikasa said, kneeling over him. “It’s okay.” She tilted her head. “You were just dreaming.”

Eren sat up, rubbing his head. “I think I was with Dad,” he said.

“His hands are fine!” Eld said. “I think you’re right, Hange.”

"Maybe there's more of that Titan serum in the basement!" Hange gasped. "Oh, Erwin, we *have* to get there, now! Please, please, *please*!"

What else are you hiding, Dad? Eren furrowed his brow.

Mikasa furrowed her brow, sitting up straight. "It was a dream," she said. She turned to glance at the side as Eren scratched the top of his head.

"Yeah," he said. He put his hand down and started, looking at his chest, where the golden key hung.

"Wait!" Armin gasped suddenly. "Eren—didn't your father take the key with him when he went into the Interior?"

"Shit, he did!" Eren exclaimed.

"That's it," Erwin muttered. *That's what I was missing*. "There's the conclusive proof," he said. "It definitely wasn't a dream. Somehow, for some reason, Dr. Jaeger came back to Wall Rose, gave Eren the key, turned him into a Titan, and then. . . what? Where did he go?"

Eren frowned. *I wonder*.

"Come on," Mikasa said, standing up. "They're handing out food rations."

Eren blinked up at her, then nodded, tucking the key into his shirt before standing up and following her outside.

"You're not even going to question it, are you, Jaeger?" Jean sighed.

"Nah."

"I think this used to be where they stored all the dry goods," Mikasa commented as they walked into the crowded courtyard, filled to the brim with refugees as they milled about, waiting for food. "Now, it's where they corral the refugees."

There's so many, Krista thought. *Just how many people managed to get through the Gate before it closed? And how many were trapped behind it, knowing they were doomed?* She wasn't sure she wanted to know.

Eren brought a hand up to his face, squinting and shielding the sun. His eyes widened with a gasp.

The courtyard was a sea of people, displaced civilians and soldiers alike. The refugees all wore identical expressions of desolate hopelessness and misery, shoulders slumped, heads down, as they stood in line for small, dry chunks of bread, and the soldiers frowned as they spoke to each other, backs turned to the Marians, brows furrowed and noses wrinkled.

"The hell?" Connie scowled. "What's with those faces?"

Eren crossed his arms, glaring at the ground, and Mikasa sighed quietly. Sasha shifted nervously. Up until recently, *she'd* been one of those people, looking down on the refugees, convinced they were nothing but a burden.

A brown-haired Garrison guard scowled as he handed a small loaf of bread to a blonde-haired little girl, choppy bangs falling over dull, ice-blue eyes.

“Annie!” Armin cried.

“That’s right,” Jean said. “You three were all from the same village, weren’t you? Southeast Maria?”

“How did you get there so quickly?” Eren asked. “Bertolt, I thought you said that you didn’t know the Titans had attacked until a few days after the breach.”

Bertolt glanced at Annie, face slowly turning red, sweat pooling on his nose. “I was with my father on a trip to Trost,” Annie said quickly. “We were staying in a village near the Gate when the Titans attacked. Bertolt and Reiner found me a few days later at the refugee camp, and that’s when I found out the rest of the village had been destroyed.”

Reiner stiffened as glances were shot at them—Eren, Armin, and Mikasa looked more sympathetic than pitying, and, to his surprise, even Jean looked empathetic. *That’s right. Our village was destroyed. We lost everyone. . . everything*.

“Where’s your father, Annie?” Sasha asked. “I mean, I get it if you don’t want to—!”

“We were separated,” Annie said stiffly, fists clenched in her lap.

“Oh!” Eren snapped his fingers. “I remember! You said you wanted to go back to your homeland—you want to reunite with him there, right?”

“Uh, yeah—”

“Why not join the Corps, then?” Hange asked. “There was a higher chance of you being able to visit your village that way.”

“Like I said, I wanted to stay alive,” she bit out. Hange raised their hands.

“What was your village called?” Moblit asked.

“Lib—” Bertolt began, stuttering as Reiner said, “Mar—” at the same time.

“Libmar?” Moblit frowned.

“Yeah,” Bertolt nodded. “Libmar. It’s small,” he added as Moblit opened his mouth, looking thoroughly confused. “It’s not even on most maps.”

“All right, then.” Moblit shrugged.

Eren lowered his hand, staring in horror. “Hey, get in line!” He started at the sudden shout, glancing to the side.

“Shut up!” a brown-haired refugee in a dusty white shirt snarled, clinging onto the wrists of a dark-haired man, a bald patch the size of a small hat on the top of his head. “I haven’t eaten for two days!” He wrenched his hand away from where it clung onto his collar and tried to shove him away.

Two days. At that time, it hadn’t felt particularly long, but, thinking back on it now, Eren realized just how long they’d spent in those boats. *How was I not starving?*

“We haven’t exactly survived,” Mikasa said, watching the scene impassively, while Eren looked on in shock.

“Eren!” Eren turned at the sound of his name. “Mikasa!”

Armin rushed forwards, arms laden with three loaves of bread. “Armin,” Eren said.

Mikasa watched with a small smile as Armin stopped in front of them, panting slightly. "Glad I found you," he said. "Grandpa scrounged a little extra by saying he has kids."

"Thank you, Armin," Mikasa said. "Seriously. We might not have been able to get any if it weren't for you." She shot Eren a small glare and he shrivelled a bit, remembering just how he'd reacted in the face of Armin's kindness.

"Thank you," Mikasa smiled as he handed a loaf to her. Eren stared as Armin placed one in his hands.

Armin started as Eren glanced up behind him to where an ash-haired, mustachioed soldier stood, glaring down at the children. "'Ch!" He scowled, turning around and sulking off.

Eren frowned, staring reproachfully at his retreating back. "What's his deal?"

"There's nothing we can do about it," Armin said simply. "There's a shortage of food." He glanced at the loaf in Eren's hands. "That's a whole day's ration." Eren stared down at the rough piece of bread clutched in his hand. "There are too many refugees. They were already dealing with famine before we got here." Four men struggled in a tight skirmish in the centre of the courtyard while soldier watched on, one hand on his hip, uninterested. "There's a strife between the locals and the outsiders."

Jean winced at the memory of the famine. "He's right," he sighed. "We weren't exactly. . . welcoming to the refugees. Sorry." He directed the last part to Eren, Armin, and Mikasa.

"It's fine," Mikasa said.

"Yeah," Armin nodded. "You had your own reasons."

"It's not like we were exactly grateful," Eren muttered awkwardly.

"Why are we giving out food to the refugees?" the man who had sneered at Eren, Armin, and Mikasa earlier grumbled as he watched the men fight. Eren and Mikasa looked up, hearing him. "Since the Titans broke through," he added, smirking. "They should've eaten a few more so there would be fewer refugees," he scoffed.

A furious silence fell.

"The *gall* of that bastard!" Petra cried, leaping to her feet. "How could he—that little—argh!" She stomped her foot, fists clenched.

"We should feed *him* to the Titans," Eren snarled, hands curled into tight fists, eyes blazing. "That shit. . . he has no idea—!"

Mikasa and Armin inhaled sharply staring at the men, brows drawn together. Eren grit his teeth, clenching his fists and marching forwards. "Eren!" Armin shouted.

"Oh, shit, no, wait!" Connie cried.

"Eren, no!" Sasha yelled.

"Eren, *yes!*" Petra said.

"Oh, my god." Jean facepalmed.

“It’s for certain we’ll have less food,” the mustachioed soldier sighed, putting his hands on his hips. Eren stopped in front of him and struck out, kicking him sharply in the shin. “Ow!” A few people glanced over as the man stumbled and glared at the boy. “What are you doing, you brat?” he demanded, swinging a fist forward. Eren cried out as he stumbled, and the other man kicked out, sending him tumbling to the ground.

“That *asshole!*” Hange cried. “He’s kicking a child! For being right!”

“Sounds familiar,” Mikasa said, glancing at Levi. He glared back at her.

Erwin sighed, rubbing his nose. “Can we not bring this up right now?”

Eren pushed himself up, tears in his eyes, and turned, glaring at the men. “You don’t know what it’s like!” he shouted as everybody in the courtyard turned to stare. “You haven’t even seen it happen!”

“Normally, this would be a dumbass decision,” Jean said. “But, for once, I agree with the Suicidal Bastard. That Garrison asshole has no right to go around spewing that bullshit.”

“Colour me shocked!” Ymir smirked. “Is the horseface actually *agreeing* with Eren?”

“Hey, I never said that!”

“So you’ve always been like that, huh, Jaeger?” Oluo snorted. “Figures you would’ve been one of the dumb kids—” Blood spurted from his mouth.

“Just bite it off, next time,” Petra sighed, shoving his head away.

“Huh?” the mustachioed man glanced down.

“How a Titan eats a human!” Eren screamed, red mark blooming on his cheek, tears pricking to corners of his eyes.

“Good for you,” Eld said. “But also bad for you. That was stupid. You’re stupid.”

“Oh, shut up.”

The man started then grit his teeth, marching forwards. “Shut it!” he snarled, raising his fist.

“Ain’t this just like that scene with Armin and the bullies?” Ymir asked. “Dumbass beating someone while they’re down ‘cause they’re right, and they’re stupid?” Armin winced, and Mikasa glared at her.

“It is an interesting parallel,” Erwin noted.

“He’s sorry!” Armin cried, rushing between them. “He’s frustrated because he’s hungry,” he said, arms held out in front of his friend. “That’s why he lashed out,” he continued, smiling even as his eyes darted side-to-side and his arms trembled, a bead of sweat on his cheek. “I’m really sorry,” he continued, shrugging his shoulders and looking up apologetically at the soldiers while Mikasa rushed to kneel next to Eren. “Sorry!” He bent forwards in a sharp bow.

“Why would you grovel to that asshole?” Connie asked. “You guys are obviously right. You’re just boosting an ego that has no reason being nearly that inflated!”

"No." Erwin shook his head. "He was right. It may not have been the best choice, morally speaking, but what he did at that point saved Eren a beating."

The soldier stared down, confused then glanced to the side. He grit his teeth upon spotting the judgemental looks of the refugees. "Yeah, well. . ." he grumbled. "You all won't starve because of what we're doing for you." He turned, stalking away. "Even kids need to have some gratitude," he tossed over his shoulder as he vanished into the crowd.

"You were pretty ungrateful, Eren," Armin said. "I mean, they could have easily refused to feed us."

"I know," he sighed. "I was just—I was stupid, okay?"

"*Was?*" Jean snorted.

"Now you're pushing it, horseface."

"Okay!" Armin called, fake-cheery voice bright despite its obvious tremor.

"I guess the Walls aren't as united as we thought," Bertolt said.

"Keep going at this rate, and they're going to destroy themselves," Reiner agreed, scratching his chin. "No Titans necessary for that."

"Damn it," Eren hissed, and his friends glanced at him. "I'm not going to be grateful to someone like him," he snarled, gritting his teeth, glaring at the ground.

"The mark on his cheek's almost gone!" Petra said.

"I guess you were right," Moblit told Hange. Reiner, Annie, and Bertolt glanced at each other.

"I'll go back to Wall Maria," Eren spat, sitting on a ledge while Armin and Mikasa stood in front of him, the shadows of the columns looming across the ground. "I'll kill all those Titans."

"Eren," Armin said, tilting his head, smiling weakly. "You're not serious, are you?"

"He is," Mikasa sighed. *Unfortunately*.

"I'm serious!" Armin jumped as Eren shouted, slamming his fists on his thighs. "I'm not like those stuck-up soldiers!" he shouted, shoulders tense. He picked up his uneaten loaf of bread and glared at it. "I don't want this!" he hurled it forwards, and Armin gasped as it hit his shoulder, juggling it frantically before it fell to the floor.

A collective gasp rang through the room.

"You fucking *idiot*," Ymir snarled, eyes blazing.

"Did you not hear the part about the famine?" Jean snapped, glaring at him.

"The hell do you think you're doing, throwing away perfectly good food?" Sasha demanded, voice cracking in horror.

"I'm not sure if you got the memo, but there's nowhere *near* enough food in the Walls for your spoiled ass to be tossing around," Levi hissed, fists clenched, knuckles white.

"I know," Eren said, sinking lower and lower in his seat, cheeks red as glares bore into from all sides. "I was. . . mad."

“Yeah,” Oluo snorted. “Because it’s okay to waste food during a fucking *food shortage*, because you’re the angry main character—argh!”

“For once, I agree with him,” Gunter said, still glaring at Eren as he shoved a tissue into his mouth. “That was really dumb of you, Eren.”

“Eren, you’re going to starve!” Armin protested.

“If the kid wants to waste food, then he can waste away,” Levi said coldly, crossing his arms. “That’s his own problem.” Mikasa made an effort to glare at him while still glowering disapprovingly at Eren.

“Aren’t your frustrated?” Eren demanded, leaping off the ledge marching forwards, fists at his sides. “You can’t beat those Titans by accepting food through charity.”

“No,” Connie rolled his eyes. “But charity is a perfect plan for staying alive. Even *I* know that.”

“That’s impossible! You can’t beat them,” Armin cried. “We have no other choice but to live within these Walls. If you’re unreasonable, you’ll die. Just like my mother and father.”

A few people glanced at Armin, who’s cheeks had lost a touch of colour. “What happened to your parents, Arlert?” Mike asked, though not unkindly.

“Were they in the Corps?” Sasha asked.

“No,” Armin said, turning an apple around in his hand. “I—uh, I’d rather not talk about it.”

Sasha nodded, sitting back down. “‘Kay. Sorry about that.”

“It’s fine.”

Erwin watched him from the corner of his eye. *Unreasonable?*

“So you’re going to bow your head to those bastards?” Eren shot back, glaring at the blond boy. “Aren’t you embarrassed?”

“I have no choice right now!” Armin shouted, cheeks flushed as he yelled.

He’s smart, Mike realized. *Of course he is. Good instincts, too. Give him some courage and a bit more brawn, and he’d be a good leader someday.*

“People are just saying that!” Eren’s voice rose as they continued arguing. “Why don’t you continue living like cattle, you coward!” Armin gasped, eyes widening.

“Asshole!” Jean jumped to his feet, glaring at him. “He just saved your ass from a beating, *and* got you food—which, may I remind you, you *threw away*. Are you seriously so self-centred and *dumb*—” He ducked as Sasha leapt to stand on the couch and hurled an orange at Eren.

“Oi!” He threw his hands up, ducking, as the fruit sailed to him. Mikasa caught it an inch before it hit his face and tossed it back onto the table.

“You’re a shithead, Eren,” Sasha said calmly, flopping back onto the couch.

“Yeah, I know,” Eren muttered, face on fire, looking away from everybody.

Hange sighed. “Well, at least he matured—no?” they glanced up as Ymir snorted loudly, shaking her head and rolling her eyes.

“Not enough.”

Mikasa surged forwards, sending Eren tumbling to the floor with a well-placed punch to the cheek.

“Damn!” Connie said. “Never thought I’d live to see *that* happen.”

Petra clapped appreciatively. “Good for you,” she said. “No offense, Eren, but you completely deserved that.”

He winced. “Yeah, I know.”

“Mikasa. . .” Armin said quietly. The girl lowered her arm slowly, staring straight ahead. Armin turned to look at Eren, who lay sprawled on the ground.

“If Armin is a coward, then you and I are also cowards,” Mikasa said calmly. “We’ve depended on other people to flee from the Titans.” Eren forced himself up, turning to look at her as she continued speaking. “The food we have today is because of charity.” Eren stared up at her, eyes wide. “There’s no way that cowards like us could kill a single Titan.”

“Well, that isn’t exactly true,” Armin smiled.

“I mean. . .” Sasha trailed off, waving a hand at Mikasa. Her cheeks took on a faint hue and she tugged at her scarf.

Eren looked to the side with a small hiss.

“The mark from Mikasa’s punch is practically gone already,” Moblit noted. Hange nodded, scribbling it down.

“Just how fast do these healing powers work?” Hange asked as they snapped the notebook shut. “Do you think your psychological state has anything to do with it? And what if you focused specifically on healing something? Would it work faster? And how does it compare to a real Titan?”

“Hange, I have no idea.”

“Oh, my god, we *have* to do more experiments!” Reiner eyed them warily.

“Just like what your mother said,” Mikasa continued. “Surviving is the most important thing.”

Eren sighed. *And I’m already failing. Fantastic*.

She walked towards him, snatching the bread from Armin as she passed. Eren’s eyes widened as she shoved the entire loaf in his mouth. “Mikasa!” Armin said.

Sasha snorted into her hand, falling off the couch. Ymir burst into shameless laughter and Krista covered her eyes with her hair, cheeks burning red as the taller girl shoved her face between her shoulder blades, her own shoulders shaking with mirthful sobs.

“Eat it,” Mikasa said, shoving the bread further into Eren’s mouth. “You have to survive.” There were tears in Eren’s eyes as more bread than he could handle was forced deeper down his gullet. “I’m not going to let you starve.”

"I don't think that should be your main concern right now," Jean wheezed, slamming a fist into his chest, coughing as tears of laughter streamed down his face.

"You all suck," Eren declared, crossing his arms, cheeks red.

Eren let out a small sob as he closed his eyes and tears flowed down his cheeks.

"Is he crying 'cause he's sad, or 'cause of the bread?" Connie asked.

"You choose, man. You choose."

Two Garrison officers stood in the streets as a river of people flowed past. "*A few days later, many refugees were put out to plough the fields*." Eren, Armin, and Mikasa stood next to Armin's grandfather, dragging hoes through hard soil, wrapped in rough woolen cloaks as flakes of snow drifted to the ground around them.

Mikasa grimaced, remembering the longs months of plowing. *Not that it worked*. Growing plants in the cold winter months would have required a miracle not even a Titan Shifter could have provided.

"*However, the shortage of food could not be resolved*." An officer stood on a raised platform in front of rows upon rows of men and women, other soldiers lined up next to him. Reiner and Bertolt stood in the crowd, watching the presentation with looks of shock that mirrored those of the refugees around them.

"Reiner! Bertolt!" Sasha said. "That's right—you two arrived at the camp later, didn't you?"

Mike frowned, scratching his head. "I remember my squad helped with evacuations in Southeast Maria. I don't remember many small villages. . . there was an older fellow who said he was the last survivor from a village in the area, though. I don't suppose you knew him?"

Bertolt and Annie shared a quick, alarmed look. "Maybe," Reiner said. "I don't remember much. I don't think we were even evacuated by Scouts, actually. I just remember hopping onto a horse and running."

"If so, then you're extremely lucky to be alive," Mike nodded.

If he's telling the truth, then he's certainly an asset to the Corps, survival-wise. Erwin frowned. If *he's telling the truth. There's something about this that just feels off*.

"*The following year, 846, the locals and many refugees old enough to serve in the military were tasked with reclaiming Wall Maria*." A few Military Police officers stood on a dirt field, watching as people flooded past them.

Hange looked away from the screen, and stared at their fingernails, lips pursed. Levi sighed, scratching his forehead, and Erwin dragged a hand down his face. Mike grimaced.

Armin stood in front of his grandfather, head down, as the old man took of his hat and placed it on top of his head before turning and walking after the other drafted militia.

Armin stared at the TV, lips pursed tightly over his teeth, fists clenched at his sides. *Don't cry*. He took a deep breath. *Don't cry*. A tear ran down his cheek and he squeezed his eyes shut. *Damnit!* He wiped his arm fiercely across his face.

Ah. Levi glanced at Armin. *I see*. He frowned. *That's. . . unfortunate*.

The earth rumbled as the Gate of Trost was pulled open and a horde of humans flooded down the destroyed street of Inner Maria. "*Of the 250,000 sent to battle*. . ." A Scout sat astride a horse, raising a sword while other soldiers around him raised their own, screaming with him. "*Roughly half of the population of that region*. . ." Civilians walked after the small group of soldiers, wielding pitchforks and other farm tools.

"They didn't even get horses?" Krista asked, horrified. "But, that's. . . that's suicide!"

"Please," Ymir scoffed. "You really think they actually thought that a group of farmers and refugees was going to take back the Wall?"

"What do you mean?" Connie asked. Armin looked at the ground, silent.

"They never expected the forces to return," Annie said quietly, and most of her fellow graduates turned around to look at her, while the veterans continued looking away. "It was just a purge. There wasn't enough food or space for all the Marians, and they needed to get rid of the dead weight. Am I wrong?" she asked, turning to look at Erwin.

Erwin shook his head. "No," he said. "You're absolutely right."

"Wait, wait, wait." Sasha slashed her hands through the air vigorously. "Then—they *knew* they were all going to die?"

"Expected it," Levi said dully. "Hoped for it, even."

"So, basically," Jean said. "The government killed a few *hundred* thousand people, just to preserve the food resources?" The silence was all the answer he needed. Marco put a hand on his shoulder, squeezing, as he shook his head. "I know why they *had* to, but. . ." he clenched his fists.

"They shoulda just lined them up and shot 'em," Ymir muttered. "Would've been easier."

"*Only a few hundred survived*." Blood splattered the dirt near a severed arm, a single sword stuck into the ground next to two Survey Corps flags, fluttering in the evening wind.

Only a few hundred, Krista echoed in her mind. *Less than a fraction of what was originally sent out.*

But the only reason you're alive right now is because *they died*, Historia argued. *So isn't it a good thing, technically? The rest of humanity got to survive because they were eaten*.

But—! Krista resisted the urge to grab her head and scream. *Ugh. This sucks*.

"*However*. . ." Titans stood on a plain, silhouetted by the setting sun, clouds drifting through the cloudy sky. "*The sacrifice of all those lives helped resolve the shortage of food*."

The music really is beautiful, Sasha thought. *If you ignore what's happening, you can almost relax. . .*

Armin sat against a wall, holding his grandfather's hat in trembling fingers, and buried his face in it, tears streaming down his face. Eren and Mikasa stood near him, watching as he sobbed quietly, shoulders shaking.

"It's all because of the Titans," Eren said quietly. "If we could kill them all, we would be able to go home." Armin sniffed loudly, moving the hat away from his face while Mikasa watched, face blank.

Eld sighed. *Is it that easy, really?* he wondered. *Even if we do kill them all, who's to say that the Armoured and Colossal won't appear again? And, even after that.* He frowned. *What if there are other threats in the outside world? No—it's all too complicated. But there's only one thing that's for certain—the Mindless Titans aren't our only problems, now*.

Eren squatted down next to Armin. "Armin," he said. "Next year I'm going to sign up for cadets training." Armin's eyes widened as he turned to look at him. Mikasa sighed, closing her eyes. "I want to get strong," Eren said. "To fight those Titans."

Armin looked back down at his hat, tears still swimming in the corners of his eyes, expression set. "Me, too," he said quietly.

Reiner shook his head. "Figures you'd be the one who'd get them to join up."

"Armin," Eren said, turning to stare at him, eyes wide.

"Me, too!" Armin said louder, raising his head, glaring ahead.

Erwin raised his eyebrows. *I didn't expect him to be the first to pledge*. He'd always assumed it had been Eren and Mikasa who'd brought Armin into the fold. *Read him wrong, apparently. He's got more guts than we gave him credit for*.

Eren frowned, but didn't say anything. "I'll go, too," Mikasa said, and he looked up at her.

"Mikasa, you don't have to go," he protested. "You said the most important thing was to survive.

"Yes." Mikasa blinked. "I'll join so that you won't die."

Eren's fingers twitched. *And it didn't work, did it?* He sighed, almost imperceptivity, at the memory of Mikasa's promise to Carla. *And I got chomped during our first fight*.

"Blunt as ever," Sasha muttered.

Armin and Eren looked up at her. Eren tilted his head a bit and stood up. "Huh?" Armin looked up at him.

Eren stared ahead, eyes full of determination. "All right," he decided. "Together, then."

Mikasa watched him and Armin glanced between them before nodding.

"Oh, are we going to see the Cadets, now?" Connie asked. "That's gotta be the next. . . uh, arch?"

"Arc," Marco corrected. "And, yeah."

"Cool!"

The sun shone down on the Cadet Corps from a blue sky littered with fluffy white clouds. "104th Cadet Corps Boot Camp starts now!" Shadis shouted as the camera panned down. Armin stood amidst a row of other trainees in the compounds before three instructors. A fence of spiked logs ran along the top of the ridge as Shadis stood in front of two wooden buildings.

"Ah, the nostalgia," Eld said dryly.

"Best years of my life," Jean joked, rolling his eyes.

Shadis stepped forwards. "I'm your drill sergeant, Keith Shadis," he announced, glaring down at them, wide eyes ringed with dark circles. "I have no intention of giving you a warm welcome," he continued as the camera panned over the rows of soldiers standing firmly at parade rest. "Right now, you're all nothing but livestock to feed the Titans."

Connie squinted as he leaned forwards. "Hey, there's a bunch of us in the background!"

"You're right!" Sasha said. "Uh. . . Armin and Connie? And is that Mina?"

"Ymir," Krista pointed out. "And there's Bertolt."

"Marco, there's you!" Jean pointed. "Well, okay, it's just a little smudge in the background, but it's still you! And Thomas, too!"

"No, even less than livestock!"

"Well, he's as warm and loving as I remember," Mike muttered.

"Congratulations. The dumbass remains a dumbass," Levi grumbled.

The camera moved down a row of trainees, including Annie, who stared ahead impassively, eyes dull, an expression of boredom on her face, as if the training yard was the last place in the world she wanted to be, and Jean, wearing a small smirk as he stared ahead, eyebrows cocked arrogantly.

"Wow, Annie does *not* look happy," Connie said, with an uneasy chuckle. "Come on, lighten up!"

"No," she replied, crossing her arms.

"You're gonna lose that smile real soon, Horseface," Eren smirked. A round of giggles and chuckls rose from the cadets, and Omni snickered.

"Hm?" Hange glanced up. "What happens?"

"Oh, you'll see." Ymir grinned wickedly. Jean groaned, burying his face, burning red and strongly resembling a tomato, in a couch cushion.

Marco stood next to him, staring ahead, an expression of fierce determination on his face. Connie was next to him, a small bead of sweat on his cheek as he stared forwards, mouth a comically thin line.

"Let me guess," Levi said. "You were one of those 'dedicate your hearts to humanity!' idiots, weren't you, Freckle-Face?"

Petra looked hurt as Marco turned red. "*I* was one of those 'dedicate your hearts to humanity' cadets. . ."

"Well, you outrank him, so that's fine." Gunther patted a dejected-looking Petra on the shoulder.

"I'm going to spend the next three years training all you worthless scum," Shadis spat as Reiner and Bertolt were shown, arms held stiffly behind their backs as they looked straight ahead.

"Jeez, are you three *always* this stiff?" Hange asked.

"Uh. . ." Bertolt began turning red.

"Never mind, got my answer."

Thomas gulped as Shadis continued speaking. "I'll drill into you how to kill those Titans," Shadis continued. Krista was shown standing in the row in front of Connie, lips pursed as she stared ahead, Sasha standing a few rows behind them.

"There we are!" Sasha squealed. Her expression dropped suddenly. "Hey, why am I so far back?"

"In three years, when you stand in front of a Titan. . ." Armin stared ahead fiercely, the sun glinting off his golden locks. "It's up to you to decide if you're still livestock. . ." Mikasa looked forwards, a thick strand of hair hanging over her face. "Or if you're a Titan-killing soldier that will protect humanity."

"Or, you know, you'll be a dumbass MP," Levi said. Annie glanced at him, and Mike reached around to grab Erwin's arm and nudge him in the side. "What? It's true."

***Yes*. A choir bell began ringing in the background as Eren glared ahead, green eyes dark, even in the bright sunlight, face twisted with hate. *That's what I will be*. The camera closed in on his face, clouded with fury. *I'll kill every single Titan*.**

Hange frowned. *The music's ominous. . .*

"Say, Omni," Armin said as the ending began playing.

"Hm?" Omni glanced at him.

"You know how you said that dead characters come to the Web?"

"Yeah?" Omni sat up straighter, propping her popcorn bowl in her lap. "Dead and done characters. Why—*oh*." Her eyes widened. "Ah. Yes."

More than a few people were staring at Omni now, various emotions ranging from hope to tentative curiousity in their eyes. "Do you know where. . . well, *everyone* is?" Eren asked.

Omni cleared her throat, tucking a strand of hair behind her ear and pulling out the small rectangle she'd been fiddling with so enthusiastically earlier. "Uh, yeah, there's loads of characters here—holy *shit*, that's a lot of dead people. Oh, holy *shit*."

"What?" Jean asked.

"That's a *lot* of dead people."

"Yeah, we kinda got that," Ymir muttered.

"Can it, Jumpy," Omni snapped. Ymir's eyes widened by a fraction of an inch. "So, why're you asking?" he asked.

"I was wondering if we would be able to, well, *see* them?" Armin asked. "You know, like Marco?"

"Oh." Omni's expression softened, and she pursed her lips. "Oh. Oh, hun. Well." She scratched the back of her neck.

Marco glanced at Armin. "Not all of us are, well *at* the branches," he said gently. "Most of them chose to move on. Different universes. You know?"

"Well. . . what does that mean?" Eren asked.

Omni coughed into her fist. "Ya can't see most of 'em," she said, voice slightly muffled. "Yeah, uh, sorry 'bout that."

"Oh." Eren's face fell, and Mikasa looked down, twisting her finger in a tassel of her scarf. "Oh. Okay."

"But there are some people here!" Marco said quickly. "Like Mina! She's with Meden, with the Avengers—!"

"Oh, right!" Omni clapped her hands together, interrupting him. "Almost forgot! Before characters leave for other universe in the Web," she said, "they have the option to leave a message for anyone from their original universes."

"Can we see these messages?" Erwin asked.

"Well," Omni frowned. "Normally, you've gotta wait until you die—"

"Can we. See. The messages?" Levi growled, fists clenched. Omni threw her hands in the air.

"Christ, fine!" She began tapping the screen of her rectangle again. "I'll see if I can get the drives transferred here. Y'all're making my job so much harder," she added, rolling her eyes.

A small smile flitted across Mikasa's face. "Thank you, Omni," she said.

"Whatever," Omni grumbled. She glanced up a few seconds, frowning. "What're you doing?" she asked. "C'mon," she added, nodding at the TV as the opening began playing again. "The next episode's starting. Focus—the fate of your whole fucking world hangs in the balance."

Episode – 3. A Dim Light Amid Despair: Humanity's Comeback, Part 1

"Hey, mop-top!" Shadis stepped forwards, head blocking the sun.

"Sir!" Armin leapt to position, fist flying over his chest.

"Oh, *no*. . ." Armin groaned, burying his face in his hands. Across the room, Jean, Sasha, Connie, and Marco made similar expressions of horror.

"Ah," Hange said sagely. "Initiation." They shook their head. "I remember those days. . ."

"What do they call you, maggot?" Shadis demanded.

"Armin Arlert, from Shinganshina, sir!" Armin shouted.

"Wow, seriously?" Shadis stopped in front of Armin, hands crossed behind his back. "Why would your parents curse you with such a dumb name?"

"It was my grandfather, sir!" Armin replied loudly.

Oluo snorted into his tea and Eld elbowed him. "Hey, what was that for?"

"Cadet Arlert!" Shadis leaned forwards while Armin stood shock-still, eyes locked on a point in the distance, visibly trembling. "Why is a runt like you here?"

"Hey, you're next to Ymir!" Krista cried.

"I was a bit focused on other things," Armin whimpered.

"To help humanity overcome the Titans!" Armin shouted, screwing his face up as sweat ran down his cheek.

"That's delightful to hear!" Shadis proclaimed, standing up straight. "You're going to be a great light snack for them!" He slammed his hand on top of Armin's head, causing the boy to jump. "Row three, about face, runt!" He whirled him around before marching off, Armin staring ahead, eyes wide with terror.

"Oh, my god," Ymir snorted. "That face!"

"You weren't subject to it!" Armin wailed. "You'll never understand!"

"And what do you call yourself?" Shadis asked, looming over Thomas.

The atmosphere changed immediately, laughter and jokes coming to a screeching halt as the blond boy appeared on screen.

"Dead," Erwin said quietly.

"Yeah," Mike muttered. "I kinda figured."

"Sir!" Thomas saluted. "My name is Thomas Wagner, I'm from the Trost District!"

"I can't hear you!" Shadis shouted, spittle flying through the air.

Levi wrinkled his nose. "Ew."

A grey-haired officer walked by as Shadis continued shouting at Thomas. "I'm from Trost, sir, my name is Thomas—"

"Shut up!" Shadis interrupted. "Nobody cares! Next!"

"Charming," Jean said dryly. "Anybody else feeling nostalgic?"

"That's gonna be you in a few minutes, Jean," Eren pointed out.

“And who asked you, Titan Breath?”

“Nobody. What made you think I was talking to you, Horseface?”

“You literally *said* my name—"

“Look at him go.” The bespectacled officer smiled, age lines crinkling, as Shadis marched up to another unfortunate trainee. “The man is a master when it comes to fresh-faced recruits,” he said as Shadis advanced on another girl.

“Mina,” Connie muttered, then perked up. “Hey, you said that she’s here, right?” he asked Marco.

“Well, not here, exactly,” he said. “She’s in, uh—”

“Universe L2516TK,” Omni interrupted through a mouthful of corn chips. “City of Los Angeles, twenty-first century, helping Meden keep a bunch of superheroes under control.”

“Yeah, that.”

“That takes me back,” his companion, a blond-haired man with a large nose chuckled.

“Is a pathetic worm like you the best Karanese has to offer?” Shadis roared, hunched over so he was eye-to-eye with Mina.

“Sir!” Mina shouted, squeezing her eyes shut. “I’m afraid that’s the case, sir!”

“The hell is she agreeing with him?” Levi demanded, crossing his arms and scowling.

Mike sighed, shaking his head. “You never had to deal with his initiation bullshit, but he can be pretty intimidating.”

“What, that pile of nerves?” Levi furrowed his brows.

Connie poked Jean’s arm. “How did he *not* get put through the initiation shit?” he hissed.

“Who knows?” Jean shrugged. “Maybe Shadis was scared shitless of him, too.”

“Well, you can tell your backwoods—”

“But what’s the point of all the intimidation?” the blond man wondered as they continued making their rounds.

“It’s a rite of passage,” the older man replied. “Through stress and denigration, we revert them into blank slates. From there,” he explained. “We can mould them, bit by bit, into proper soldiers.”

“‘Blank slates’,” Ymir snorted. “Yeah. That worked.”

“Yes, sir!” Mina half-screeched.

“Next!” Shadis loomed over a dark-haired boy.

“He’s the first step in that process.”

“What do they mean, ‘first step’?” Eren asked. “There was literally no one else—he just spent three years screaming at us.”

“Well, that is his favourite pastime,” Moblit noted.

“Hush, Moblit!” Hange chided, smacking him lightly with their notebook.

“We seem to really excel at that back home, sir!” the boy shouted, perspiring nervously.

“Row four, about face!”

“Huh?” The blond man watched as Shadis marched past Annie and Eren. “There are some he’s passing by.”

“There are always exceptions.”

Erwin leaned down. “I think we all remember the first exception,” he said quietly into Levi’s ear.

Levi rolled his eyes, nudging him away with his elbow. “Shut it, Eyebrows.”

Annie stared ahead coldly as Shadis’s shadow passed over her. “A drill instructor is nothing compared to what those recruits have seen,” the older officer sighed.

He’s right. Eld sighed. *I doubt a bit of screaming could scare them, after they had to live through the Titan attacks*.

Mikasa didn’t move a muscle as Shadis stalked by. “They were there.” Reiner and Bertolt stared ahead stonily, their expressions darkened by the shadows, sun shining down on their backs. “Witnesses to the hell of the Titan attack two years ago.” Eren’s eyebrows were drawn together in a faint glare as he looked ahead. “You can read it in their faces.” Ymir looked almost bored as stared blankly at the rocky face of the cliff.

“You too, Ymir?” Krista asked quietly, looking up at the older girl. A few seconds passed, and she raised her eyebrows.

“What?” she asked. “Were you expecting me to tell you all the details?”

“Well, I just—”

“I ain’t spilling any beans ‘til you come clean,” Ymir interrupted, quiet enough so that the blonde was the only one who could hear her. She started, jerking in Ymir’s arms. “He passed you, too,” she muttered. “Don’t think I didn’t notice.”

“Come on,” the officer said suddenly, turning away.

“Hm?” the blond man glanced up.

“Let’s go.” The two instructors walked down the path.

“Where are they *going?*” Oluo asked, gesturing at the screen. “It’s a cliff! What are they gonna do, walk into it until they flatten their faces?”

“What do we have over here?” Shadis snarled, glaring directly into the camera, face taking up the majority of the screen.

“He has no eyebrows!” Gunther suddenly squawked.

Eld jumped. “What the *fuck?*”

Gunther cleared his throat, cheeks pink, as the others stared at him. “Um.” He gestured at the TV. “Startled?”

Mike snorted, mustache ruffling. “Some people used to say all the stress from Commanding made him go bald. And not just his head—everywhere. Arms, legs, and his wrinkly little—"

“Okay!” Jean said loudly, clearing his throat. “Hey, didn’t he still have hair in the first episode?”

Moblit shrugged. “The joke is that the moment he left Headquarters for the last time, it all just fell off, right then and there.”

“Jean Kirschtein, sir!” Jean declared, slamming a fist over his heart. “From the Trost District!”

“And why are you here, cadet?” Shadis demanded, standing up straight.

“What’s this?” Petra sat up straight. “Do my eyes deceive me? Have you actually *impressed* him?”

“Take notes, Hange!” Mike sang. They turned red, fumbling as they tried to leapt to their feet, Moblit clinging to their waist.

“Hange, please, calm down!” he pleaded.

“Uh—” Jean started, then smirked. “To join the Military Police, sir,” he grinned. “The best of the best.” Eren blinked, glancing at him from the corner of his eye.

Eld sighed, putting his face in his hands.

“You really just said that, didn’t you?” Mike leaned against the back of the couch, crossing his arms.

Jean stared at Shadis, the beginnings of nervousness rising in his expression. “That’s nice,” Shadis said with a low chuckle. “You want to live in the Interior, do you?”

“Yes!” Jean grinned.

“Poor, poor Jean,” Marco sighed, shaking his head.

“Hey!” Jean protested. “You were talked down, too!”

“Yeah, but I wasn’t so bad that I got *headbutted*.”

“Oh, you got headbutted?” Hange whirled around, nearly falling out of the beanbag chair. “Seriously? Was it bad?”

“Yes,” the cadets chorused, all but Jean grinning wickedly.

“Now, this, I wanna see,” Mike grinned.

“Urgh!” Shadis suddenly surged forwards, slamming his forehead into Jean’s.

A few hisses rang through the room. Jean winced, rubbing his forehead.

“Ee—” Jean let out a pained groan, collapsing to his knees, hands clutching his sore skull.

Mike burst out laughing and Hange chortled, clutching their ribs, while Moblit patted their back, a small smile tugging at his lips. Levi snorted, corners of his mouth twitching imperceptibly while Ymir collapsed, howling with laughter.

“It’s not *that* funny!” Jean protested, face burning.

“Yes, it is!” Connie screeched, tears of mirth flowing down his cheeks while Sasha pounded the armrest with her fist, screaming with laughter.

“It’s funny ‘cause it’s *you!*” Eren snorted at the same time, throwing his head back as he howled with joy. “Oh, my god, you were so cocky, and then—” he broke off with a small hiccup. “And then he just—” he cut off as laughter over took him.

“Shut your trap, dumbass!” Jean yelled, colouring growing deeper with every passing second.

“No one told you to sit, recruit!” Shadis snarled, staring down at him. “If you can’t handle this, Kirschtein, then forget about joining the Military Police!” He turned, stalking away.

“Wrong,” Annie said quietly from the back of the room. “That’s literally all we do. Sit. That’s it.”

“Straight from the horse’s mouth, ladies and gentlemen,” Hange chuckled.

“What the hell is wrong with your face, you smiling idiot?!” Shadis roared, clenching his face as he jutted his head forwards, eyes wide, brows wrinkled as he shouted, mouth wide enough to see every tooth.

Marco gasped, hands flying up to his cheeks. “Oh, *no*,” he groaned, covering his eyes. “This. Oh, god. *This*.”

“Marco Bodt at your service, sir, from Jinae!” There was a thump as a fist met fabric. “South side of Wall Rose!” He beamed, despite the sweat on his face as he looked up. “I aim to join the Military Police and give life and limb in service to the King!” The music stuttered to a stop as he finished his sentence.

“Even the goddamn *orchestra* knows your fucked up,” Connie chortled.

“Hey, don’t get to comfortable, Connie,” Jean shot back. “Remember, you’re not gonna be in such a good spot soon, either.”

Connie paled. “Oh, shit,” he whispered as Ymir’s laughter went up another notch.

“What?” Hange asked, looking between them.

“You’ll see!” Sasha wheezed, clutching her ribs and wiping a tear from her eye as Connie groaned, burying his face in his arms.

“Well, then,” Shadis rumbled, raising his head and glaring down at him. “That makes you an idealistic fool. And a rube. You want the truth?” he asked. Marco’s brows drew together and he glanced to the side as Shadis drew closer. “The only use the King has for your life and limbs are as Titan fodder,” he spat as he loomed over Marco, who’s eyes were comically wide with horror, mouth agape.

“Creepy,” Moblit muttered, shuddering.

“It’s inspirational!” Hange defended.

“Sure, Squad Leader. . .”

Marco continued staring ahead, shaking in fear, mouth open in a perfect O as Shadis walked away. "Hey, cue-ball. You're up next!"

"Here it comes," Ymir grinned, rubbing her palms together.

"Ymir—!" Krista began, but gave up as the other cadets sat up, staring straight at the TV, grinning, with malice on their faces, and evil in their hearts, while Connie wailed into his cookie.

"Oh, me?" Connie started. "Sir!" His left hand shot up over his chest. "Connie Springer, from Ragako Village, sir!" The camera panned forwards, focusing on his misplaced fist.

Shocked silence descended upon the veterans while the recruits cackled and Connie dove from the couch, curling up on the floor and burying his face in the carpet, covering his head with a cushion.

"Wow," Levi said, after the recruits had calmed somewhat. "You're. . . really stupid. Like, *really* stupid. I have literally never met someone as stupid."

"How—" Gunther sighed, placing his face in his palms. "That's the *first thing* they teach you," he groaned, voice muffled by his hands. "The first thing you do when you get to camp. *Two hours* of saluting, and you—"

"Connie, my dear," Hange sighed, shaking their head. "You are truly a special one."

There was a loud, slamming noise as the screen went back for a second. "You have it backwards, Connie Springer," Shadis seethed, glaring at the boy while he held his head between his hands, the other cadets gaping in shocked horror.

"Oh, dear," Petra whispered, voice drowned out by the screeches and hoots of the recruits around them, the siren of Connie screaming into the carpet layered over the din. Levi winced, covering his ears.

Connie made a choking noise as his feet dangled uselessly above the ground. "That was the first thing you were taught." Connie's entire body began shaking as Shadis clenched his skull tighter. "This salute represents the resolve in your heart to fight those bent on the systematic destruction of our people!" Sweat and drool ran down Connie's chin, facial features twisting and distorting as Shadis dug his thumbs into his skin.

"Stop *laughing*!" Connie protested, raising his head from the ground, entire face red. "It's not funny!"

"It's *hilarious!*" Sasha hooted. "Come on, you know it is!" she added as Connie scowled, though the twitching of the corners of his lips slightly dampened the effect.

"Is your—" Eld raised a hand, reaching towards the boy, but just as quickly put it down. "Are you physically okay? Is your head okay? I feel like you shouldn't be okay. . ."

Mike put his own hand on his face, pulling the corners of his eyes towards his foread and dragging his cheeks upwards. "Yeah, that's weird. Hey, he was squeezing your skull, too, wasn't he?"

"Yeah, he should *not* be okay, how is he okay? *Is* he okay? Kid, are you—"

"He's okay," Gunther interrupted, patting the blond on the shoulder. "Chill."

“Is your heart on your right side?” he demanded as the camera panned over to where Sasha stood, two rows behind.

“Look at the guy next to Connie,” Marco said through a grin. “He. . .”

“Really doesn’t look like he knows what he’s supposed to be doing,” Jean supplied with a chuckle.

“He looks so confused!” Sasha giggled. “I mean, it’s like. . . I don’t know what it’s like.”

Eren put his hands behind his back, straightening his spine in a mimic of parade rest and pulled the corners of his mouth down, clenching his jaw. “What the fuck?” he demanded in a deep voice, eyes darting side-to-side. “What the actual, motherfucking, fuck?”

Everybody burst out laughing, Mike the loudest of all, slapping his knee with a powerful *whack* as he leaned over, gripping Erwin’s shoulder to stay upright. “Oh, come on!” he protested as Erwin shot him a disapproving look. “It’s funny!” He poked Erwin’s cheek with his finger. “You wanna smile! I know you do! It’s hilarious!” He leaned around Erwin to look at Levi. “It’s funny, right?”

“I can hardly breathe for laughing,” Levi responded monotonously.

“No, no, wait,” Ymir was wheezing, waving a hand at Eren. “You’re doing it wrong. It’s like this:” She cleared her throat, planting her fists on her hips, before widening her eyes to the point where more than a few people feared they would pop right out of her skull, and staring ahead. “Is the legal?” she squeaked in a high falsetto.

Krista let out a loud bark of laughter, then slammed her hands over her mouth, cheeks red. “Sorry,” she whispered as everybody stared.

“Hey, it’s fine!” Reiner said, waving his hand. “We’ve all got weird laughs!”

“Oh, come on!” Connie protested. “How come none of you laugh at her!”

“‘Cause it’s a sin to mock God, duh.”

Sasha raised her hand, bringing her potato to her mouth.

“Oh!” Jean whipped his head around to look at the TV. “Oh. . .” his lips curled up, twisting into a cruel grin. “Oh.”

“It’s happening.” Ymir bared her teeth in a wicked cackle. “It’s happening!”

“Oh, *shit*,” Mike gasped, realizing what was about to happen. “Wait! Is she actually going to—”

“Oh, she is,” Connie sneered, grinning triumphantly at his friend as she turned red, sinking lower and lower on the couch.

“Seriously, what is *wrong* with your class?” Oluo demanded. “I mean, you’ve already got the peanut gallery, and one of you is even a freaking *Titan*—!”

“Hey!” Eren scowled, expression good-natured, despite the way his insides had twisted at the words. “I take offense to that!”

Mikasa glanced at him from the corner of her eyes, frowning, and he shook his head, cutting her off as she opened her mouth. “I’m not gonna miss the good part ‘cause I got a bit touchy,” he whispered. “You don’t wanna miss this either, do you?”

She frowned, but her lips twitched. “I guess not,” she whispered back.

***Chomp*.**

Moblit’s hands flew up to his mouth, eyes wide as saucers. “She did it,” he whispered, face pale.

“And she’s still alive?” Levi’s eyes nearly rolled out of his skull. “Shit. The old man’s getting soft.”

Shadis stared at her, eyes wide, more in surprise than anger, his expression mirrored on many of the cadets’ faces. Sasha chewed the tater, crumbs covering the bottom half of her face, seemingly unaware of the shocked silence around her.

“What is *wrong* with you, Potato Girl?” Jean demanded. “Couldn’t you *hear* the silence?”

“You can’t hear silence,” Sasha said cheekily, crossing her arms and grinning despite the burning red of her face and ears. “And it was a good potato.”

Shadis let go of Connie, the boy crashing to the ground, a cloud of dust erupting into the air. “Oi.” Shadis turned to face her, looking as if he was torn between confusion and anger. “You there. What do you think you’re doing?”

Sasha glanced around, still chewing as Shadis approached her. She raised the potato, eyes still darting around, and took another bite.

“You didn’t *see* him?” Ymir threw her hands in the air. “You didn’t fucking *see* him? Are you blind, or something?”

“How—” Mike stared at the TV, mouth hanging open, eyes glazed over. “Sometimes, I wonder how you’re all still alive.”

Not all. Jean’s stomach twisted as he glanced at Marco, who was staring at the TV with just as much rapture as the others. *Not technically, anyways*.

“You are officially on my shit list!” Shadis roared, looming over her, Sasha staring up in shock. “Just who in the hell are you?!”

Sasha swallowed with a loud gulp, then slammed the potato against her chest. “Sasha Braus, from Dauper Village, at your service,” she said. “Reporting for duty, sir!”

“You—” Hange stared at the screen, looking torn between being impressed and dumbstruck (or, more likely, a mixture of the two). “You saluted. . . with a potato.”

“At least she did it right,” Ymir snickered. Connie coloured.

“Sasha Braus, huh?” Dry leaves blew past in the background as Shadis stood above her, shoulders tensed, fists clenched. “And what is that you’re clutching in your right hand?” he glowered.

“Shit, this is ominous,” Eld muttered. “Why is this so ominous?”

"It's the leaves," Gunther reasoned sagely. "They spell doom."

"A steamed potato!" Sasha declared, tuber still clutched in her hand. "It sat there in the mess hall, begging to be eaten. Sir!" she added.

"You've got crumbs all over your face," Levi grumbled, wrinkling his nose. "Thought a walking stomach like you would've at least figured out how to wipe your face."

"The theft, I understand," Shadis said, face shadowed, leaves still drifting by ominously. "But here? Why eat it here, of all places?"

"You know, I'm really not sure if he's mad, or just confused," Moblit muttered.

"It looked quite delicious," Sasha explained nervously, but standing firm. "And it was getting cold," she added, as two boys standing behind her stared, the first, his tanned face drenched in sweat, the other, his mouth open, staring at her as if he couldn't believe somebody so clueless could exist. "So I gave it shelter in my stomach, sir."

Erwin sighed, putting his face in his hand. Mike roared with laughter as he patted the Commander on the shoulder. Moblit slumped, looking defeated, and Hange cackled, holding their stomach as they wheezed.

"Even the guys behind you can't believe it," Ymir grumbled. "Seriously, what is *wrong* with you?"

"It's like I said!" Sasha defended. "It was a good potato, and I don't regret anything!"

"Why?" Shadis asked, not a trace of anger left in his expression, looking thoroughly befuddled. "I can't comprehend. Why would you eat that potato?"

"He isn't even pissed anymore!" Jean gaped.

"Seriously?" Eren's eyes bugged out of his head.

"Maybe the lot of you would have gotten in less trouble if you'd just confused him a bit more," Mikasa suggested blandly.

"Genius!" Connie threw his hands in the air. "Why didn't we think of that?"

"'Cause you don't think," Ymir interjected.

Sasha furrowed her brows. "Are you asking me why people eat potatoes?" she asked, sounding confounded. "I'm surprised you don't know, sir."

Moblit screeched into a cushion, pressing it into his face, and Levi's jaw dropped.

"You really said that," Mike said, eyes wider than the moon. "You really said that. You really said that, and you're *alive*."

"What the fuck is *wrong* with your class?" Oluo demanded, looking at Eren. The Shifter shrugged.

"Beats me."

A breeze blew by as the cadets all stared, eyes wide with shock: Eren's lips were parted, a single bead of sweat on his cheek as he watched from the corner of his eye, while Marco, Jean, and Connie were staring unabashedly over their shoulders dirt still on the faces

of the latter two, and drool on Connie's; Armin's eyes were wide, as he listened to the exchange, shaking, despite it not being him that was the target.

"Look at Connie's face," Ymir wheezed.

Connie turned red, crossing his arms. "It was the first day, okay?"

"Yeah, but no one else got picked up by the *head*."

Shadis's eyes were dark with unmistakable fury while Sasha continued staring up at him, blissfully unaware of her fatal mistake. "Uh—" she let out a little gasp before reaching forwards and grabbing the potato. With a little tug, she pulled it into two ridiculously uneven pieces.

Sasha groaned, putting her face in her hands as the cadets all burst into raucous laughter.

"You know, I was gonna ask what you were laughing about," Mike commented, chin in his hand. "But I'm not really sure I wanna know."

"You'll see!" Eren laughed, slapping his knee. "Oh, you'll see!"

"Here, sir," she said reluctantly, holding out the smaller bit as music began playing. "Have half."

"That—" Moblit raised his head from the cushion, looking as if he'd just aged a hundred years. "That isn't half. . ."

Shadis stared at her as he took the tiny sliver of potato. "'Have half?' Really?"

"Maybe that's why he was mad," Hange suggested. "'Cause you gave him the smaller piece!"

"That's not even a piece," Eld said. "That's like. . . you know, what happens when you poke something overcooked with a fork, and a little chunk falls off."

"You know what?" Petra grunted, head propped in her hands. "That's pretty darn accurate."

Sasha stared at him nervously and smiled tentatively, a bead of nervous sweat rolling down her face.

"Man," Connie commented, watching as Sasha stumbled around the compound for the umpteenth time. "I thought Shadis was gonna kill Potato Girl." The small group of Connie, Marco, Eren, Armin, and Mina stood on the porch of one of the barracks, Marco leaning forwards, elbows resting on the railing, and Mina leaned up against the wall, the last beams of setting sun shining down on them as they watched.

"Are you even running?" Mike asked. "It looks more like you're. . . I dunno. Flopping."

"It was a long day!" Sasha protested, crossing her arms. "And I was hungry!"

Ymir cleared her throat and Krista flushed.

"I know," Eren said as Sasha stumbled. "What a hell of a first day. It's funny," he added as the camera cut to Sasha, arms flopping weakly as she ran. "Being told to run 'till the

sun sets didn't seem to bother her nearly as much as losing meal privileges for the next five days."

"Of course." Ymir rolled her eyes. "Give the girl a chunk of bread, and she'll be good to run all the way to Sina."

"Is that an offer?" Sasha snickered. Laughter bubbled throughout the room.

"I think she said that she's from Dauper," Connie commented idly. "If I remember right, that's a small hunting village up in the mountains."

Sasha furrowed her brows, and Connie shifted awkwardly in her seat. "Is there a problem with that?" she asked.

"Wh—" He looked at her. "No! No, there isn't!"

She frowned and reached forwards, picking up a bowl of chips. Connie reached towards it, but she smacked his hand away. "Dumbass," she grumbled. Levi and Erwin exchanged a quick glance.

"Hey," Eren glanced to the side. "What's that?"

A horse-drawn, covered wagon made its way up the rocky path, past the barbed wire fences. "They're dropouts," Mina explained. "They'd prefer to work in the fields."

"But it's only the first day," Armin said, astounded, as the camera focused on two dark-haired boys in the wagon, bags in their laps, heads down.

Hange shrugged. "That's just the way it is," they said. "Not everybody's cut out for the military—it's a tough life, and most people can't handle it."

"Besides," Gunther added. "If everybody joined the military, then we wouldn't have any farmers, merchants, craftsmen, or anything like that."

"Still," Mike grunted. "It'd be nice if we had a bit more manpower."

"That's the way it is," Eren sighed. "If you can't handle the pressure, you've got to leave."

"Wow," Levi raised his eyebrows mockingly. "Look at that. Tough guy, aren't you?"

"Levi," Erwin chided as Mikasa scowled.

"It's the first day, Eren," Petra said. "I don't really think you have any room to talk yet."

Jean coughed loudly, making a noise that sounded suspiciously like 'aptitude test'.

"Hm?" Hange glanced up at Mikasa. "What's he coughing about."

She shrugged, expression blank. "You'll see."

"Hm?" Marco, Connie, and Mina glanced at him.

"I can't believe anyone would rather pull plants than fight," Eren continued, looking up into the sky.

Eren winced at his words. "Was I really that arrogant?" he asked, glancing at Armin.

"*Yes*," every recruit chorused.

"Look like it!" Hange said cheerfully.

Marco stood up. “I know about some of us, but you never mentioned where you were from, Eren,” he said.

Marco winced. “Sorry about that,” he muttered.

Eren shrugged. “It’s fine,” he said. “You couldn’t have known.”

“But he passed by you,” Marco countered. “I should have figured it out—”

“It’s fine,” Eren said. “We were all dumb back then.”

“Some more than others,” Jean mumbled into his fist.

“I can *hear* you, Horseface!”

“The same as Armin.” Eren grinned, putting a hand on Armin’s shoulder. “From Shinganshina.”

Connie made a shocked noise as the other three stared at them. “Oh, wow,” Marco said. “That means. . .”

“You saw it,” Connie said, grinning slowly. “You were there that day.”

Connie grimaced. “Sorry,” he muttered.

“Huh?” Marco stared at him. “Quiet!”

“The Colossal one?” Connie beamed, eyes alight with childish wonder. “Did you see him?” Marco glanced at Eren uneasily.

Connie winced, glancing at Eren as he pursed his lips. *Shit*. His gaze flicked over to Sasha, who was biting into the chips with the intensity of a Titan chasing down a tasty human. *I was such an insensitive shit*.

“Uh—” Eren glanced between them. “Yeah. Yeah, I did.”

Dull yellow light shone from a lantern hanging from the ceiling, illuminating the dining hall. “Yeah, okay?” Eren said exasperatedly, looking up from a spoonful of soup. “I saw the big guy.”

Bertolt tugged at the collar of his shirt with a small ‘ahem’. Annie rolled her eyes, as Reiner nudged him sharply in the side with his elbow.

A round of gasps filled the air.

“Woah, seriously?”

“Okay, exactly how tall was he?” a dark-haired boy asked.

“Who the hell is that wrinkly old dude?” Levi asked.

“Oh, him?” Ymir glanced up. “Oh, yeah. That’s Daz.”

“And he—he’s a *cadet*?” Oluo spluttered. “He looks like he’s at least fifty—”

“You don’t have much room to talk,” Gunther snickered, and Oluo bit down on his tongue in a fit of indignity. Levi rolled his eyes as he handed a napkin to Petra, who promptly shoved it over his mouth.

“He stuck his head over the Outer Wall,” Eren said uninterestedly.

“Whoa, wait!” Daz protested. “I heard he stepped over the Wall completely!”

“Well, that’s fucking ridiculous,” Hange said. “They’d have seen him all the way from Sina. But, imagine. . .” a dreamy expression over took their face. “If he actually were that big—!”

“Hange, you’re drooling!” Moblit cried.

“So did I!” cried Hannah.

“That was the rumour in my village, too!” Franz said.

“Why aren’t you and Bertolt sitting together, Reiner?” Krista asked. “You joined together, didn’t you?”

“Uh—” Reiner blinked. “We were—” he glanced at Bertolt with a frown. “Why *weren’t* we sitting together?”

Bertolt stared at him, eyes wide. “We got separated,” he said, a bit slowly. “In the food line. Remember?”

Reiner blinked, then snapped his fingers. “Right! Almost forgot!” He shrugged, grinning at Krista. “Little details, ya know?”

Bertolt watched him carefully from the corner of his eye, and Annie frowned.

“Nah,” Eren swallowed his soup and glanced up. “He was big, but not that big.”

“Not that—” Mike threw his hands into the air, rolling his eyes. “*Big*.” He snorted. “Kids these days.”

“So, what did it look like?” Mina asked.

Eren glanced at her. “It had a mouth like a corpse,” he said simply. “And no skin, just muscles.” More gasps rang through the room.

“That’s not a bad description, actually!” Hange exclaimed, scribbling it down. “Eren, how would you feel about helping me identify some other Titans—”

Eren shot Levi a panicked glance. “Uh. . . that’s not really my decision—”

“No,” Mikasa said firmly.

“And the Armoured Titan?” someone else asked. “The one that broke through Wall Maria?”

“Is that what they’re calling it?” Eren asked. “In all the panic, it was just another Titan to me.” Reiner took a sip from his tin mug, not even glancing at the other table, while the other boys at his table watched Eren with fierce intensity.

“You don’t look too interested, Braun,” Moblit said.

“Well—” Reiner shifted in his seat. “The Armoured isn’t a very—well, *fond* memory for me.”

“Of course.” Moblit’s expression softened. “I’m sorry.”

Reiner nodded, lips a tight, thin line.

“No way,” a boy gasped. “So, what were they like?”

Eren grimaced.

Eren froze with a small inhale, staring into his spoon, eyes wide, as the memory of Carla being lowered into the Smiling Titan's mouth flashed through his mind. His spoon landed in the tin bowl of soup with a small *splash*, and he grabbed his mouth, shaking slightly as he stared ahead unseeingly.

Silence fell as more than a few people glanced at Eren. "What?" he asked, glancing up at them. "I'm fine. It was a long time ago."

"Still," Marco said. "You just saw it again—"

"I'm fine," he said, firmly.

Mikasa wordlessly reached over and took his bowl of small, colourful beans ('jelly beans', Omni had called them). "Your hands were shaking," she whispered.

He frowned, but nodded, looking ahead. "Thanks," he muttered.

The other cadets watched him, brows furrowed, sweat on their faces. "C'mon," Marco said, looking at the others. "That's enough questions, all right? I'm sure he'd rather not relive everything he went through."

"Seriously, what the fuck is wrong with Daz?" Mike asked, in a transparent, but effective attempt at lightening the mood.

"Hell if I know," Ymir shrugged. "He's always like that."

"Sorry," Connie said. "We didn't mean to—"

"It's not like that!" Eren said loudly, and the other cadets looked at him.

"Prideful brat," Levi snorted, scowling. "That shit isn't gonna help anyone, dumbass." *That shit gets people killed*.

Eren raised his slice of bread, ripping out a chunk and chewing it fiercely. "Those stupid Titans," he scoffed, grinning cockily. "They're really not that big of a deal. If we focus on mastering the omni-directional mobility gear they give us," he continued. "Then it's Titan payback time!"

So cocky. Eren sighed, thinking back to the Battle of Trost. *And what did that get me?* He scowled. *Drowning in a Titan's stomach while my friends dropped like flies*.

Pain, blinding, tearing him apart, burning darkness closing around him, last seconds before he was lost and he was someone else, body that wasn't his—

Eren winced, rubbing his forehead. Mikasa glanced at him. "You okay?" she asked quietly.

He nodded. "Headache," he muttered.

"Again?" Mikasa frowned.

"It's the TV," Eren said. "Not used to it." She nodded, looking away, though she kept glancing at him from the corner of her eye.

Jean watched, one side of his face resting in his hand, as Eren spoke. "I've waited years to be trained as a soldier," Eren said. "All of a sudden, the reality is sinking in." His gaze

grew intense, and he glared at his bread. "I'm joining the Scout Regiment," he proclaimed. Then I'm sending the Titans back to hell. I'll butcher 'em."

"Yeah, sure," Jean snorted.

"Hey!" Eren protested. "I have killed Titans!"

"As a *Titan*."

"So? Still better than you!"

"What the *hell*? I'll have you know, I've got a perfectly reasonable kill count—"

"Shut up," Levi snapped. Their jaws clicked shut, but they kept glaring each other, and there was no dobut in anybody's mind that the argument was continuing, albeit silent.

"Oi, oi," Jean interrupted, and Eren started. "Hey, are you crazy or something?"

"Huh?" Eren glanced to the side to see Jean smirking at him.

Jean grimaced, covering his face. "I look so *stupid*."

"You don't just *look* stupid, you—"

"So help me, Jaeger, if you finish that sentence, I *swear to the Walls*—"

"Not that it's my business, but signing up for reconnaissance is like a death sentence."

"And, yet, here you are!" Hange chirped.

Jean shrugged. "Hey—as far as I'm concerned, I'm the only *normal* one here."

"But you *are* here," Sasha pointed out. "So doesn't that make you nutty by default?"

"Huh? What're you talking about? Unlike you guys, I actually *think* before rushing into trouble."

Sasha screwed up her face. "Yeah, I'll give you that one," she grumbled.

Eren sat up straighter, watching him. "I guess we'll see," he said. "Or, at least, I will." He turned a bit to look him in the eyes, an expression of disdain on his face. "You seem content hiding in the Interior with the MPs."

Ymir rolled her eyes. "It's not a crime to try and stay alive, dumbass," she told him.

Eren flushed. "It's just—the MPs are so—ow!" He winced as Armin stomped on his foot and jerked his head to where Annie sat in the back.

"Kid's got some major ego issues," Levi grumbled to Erwin.

"Well, I do think he's gotten better since the events on the TV," Erwin said.

"Still."

"Look," Jean said. "I'm just speaking honestly here, kid."

"*Kid?*" Eren demanded. "We're the same age!"

"Yeah, but you looked, like, ten," Ymir pointed out.

"She has a point," Armin said. "Half of us look sixteen, and the other half looks eight."

"Who's side are you on?" Eren demanded.

"The half that looks eight."

"I think it's better," Jean continued, "than being some loud-mouthed, braggart, tough-guy wannabe pretending he's not as piss-scared as the rest of us."

Levi raised his eyebrows. “Not bad,” he muttered.

“Big words, don’t hurt yourself,” Connie joked.

“Those aren’t big words, Connie,” Armin said. “There’s just a lot of them.”

Connie’s face fell. “Oh.”

“Huh?” He glanced up as Eren stood up, legs of his chair scratching the floor as he pushed it back.

“Are you trying to pick a fight?” Eren demanded, glaring at him.

“It’s a free country!” Jean protested, throwing his hands into the air. “What, I’m not allowed to have opinions?”

“Well, your opinions are wrong,” Eren pointed out.

“What? Just ‘cause they’re not the same as yours—”

Free country, he says, Erwin thought as the teens continued bickering. *Is that what they think?*

“Stop it, you guys!” Marco protested as Jean watched, brows furrowed, grinning uneasily.

“All right, sure,” Jean stood up with a small chuckle. “Makes no difference to me” The two walked to the middle of the dining hall, standing face-to-face, Eren glaring furiously, Jean smirking lazily.

“Jean’s way taller than you, too!” Connie said.

“Shut up!” Eren coloured.

“I swear to *god*, if we have to sit through any more episodes of this teenage bullshit, I’m gonna shoot my brains out,” Levi muttered. Petra giggled, and he scoffed.

A loud ringing suddenly echoed through the air and everybody glanced up. “Huh?”

A man stood in a tower, silhouetted in the purple sky of twilight, pulling a rope as the bell swung back and forth.

“Saved by the bell!” Hange said. “Literally!”

The two boys looked back at each other, the situation now significantly more awkward. Jean sighed. “Right.” He looked back at Eren. “Yeah, I’m sorry. It wasn’t my place to doubt you.” Eren frowned as Jean held his hand out. “Let’s call it even.”

“That was the fakest apology ever,” Ymir said.

“Well, it was better than getting in trouble for fighting after curfew.”

“‘Fighting after curfew’,” Mike snorted. “That is the weirdest sentence I’ve ever heard.”

Eren furrowed his brow, but didn’t make any more hostile movements. “I was at fault, too,” he said, reaching up and slapping Jean’s hand casually before turning and walking out of the room.

“Could this be the start of a beautiful new friendship?” Hange gasped.

“Yeah, no.” Eren shook his head.

Jean watched him leave, smiling smugly, but his expression fell as Mikasa walked by.

Jean let out a sudden, horrified gasp and yanked his knees to his chest, burying his face in a cushion.

"Oh?" Ymir's eyebrows raised evilly. "What's this?"

Heavenly music began playing as the image slowed down, played from Jean's point of view.

Eren spit out a mouthful of water. "*What?*" he spluttered, his drink dribbling down his chin as Levi made horrified, gagging noises. "You like Mikasa?"

"Oh, my god," Sasha sighed. "Are you seriously *that* clueless?"

Mikasa's entire form glowed as she walked past, hair shining as it fluttered behind her, eyes shining, profile sharp and in definition. Jean's eyes widened as he followed her movements with a look of shock.

Mikasa tugged her scarf up awkwardly, cheeks pink, avoiding Jean's gaze—not that she would have caught it anyways, considering his face was still shoved into a cushion.

"Perv," Ymir snorted.

"That's rich, coming from you," Jean growled, raising his head, cheeks red.

"Um, excuse me?" he called as she walked to the door. She stopped, glancing over her shoulder as Jean approached, face burning red. "Uh—" he stuttered as she turned to face him. "I, uh. . . I just wanted. . . I mean," he cleared his throat. "I've never seen anyone like you before. I mean—!" he ducked his head.

I've never seen anyone like you before. Mikasa clenched her fists, fighting down the memories, pushing down the urge to start swinging her fists. *It's fine. He didn't mean it like that. He doesn't know.*

And he never will. She glanced at Omni, who had, at some point, began reading one of her many books, completely uninterested in the events on-screen. *Right?*

"Uh, I'm. . . I'm sorry," he stammered. "You have really beautiful black hair," he forced out shyly, not meeting her eyes.

"Hey, Mikasa isn't wearing her scarf!" Sasha said suddenly.

"You're right!" Krista said. "I thought you never took it off," she said, looking at Mikasa.

She shrugged. "It was the first few days of training. I didn't want to break the dress code so early on. Plus, it needed washing."

"You mean you *don't* sleep with it on?" Ymir's jaw dropped. Mikasa scowled.

Mikasa watched him expressionlessly. "Thank you," she said before turning and walking out of the hall without a second thought, leaving Jean standing in the middle of the room, gaping after her, cheeks still flushed.

"Ouch," Sasha muttered.

"Uh—!" He blinked, then ran after her. He stopped on the porch, looking around. "Huh?"

"Would you lay off?" Eren demanded as Mikasa caught up to him. "It's no big deal!"

"Oh!" Hange leaned back, bringing a fist to their mouth. "That's gotta hurt!"

"It's just that you get so worked up you don't think things through," Mikasa said, falling in step beside him.

Eren groaned, looking down. "Again with this?" he sighed. "If you insist on worrying, worry about how long your hair is." He reached towards her, flicking it casually. "It's going to catch up with you in a bad way when we start on the ODMs."

"That's not a bad point, actually," Krista frowned, tugging on her own locks.

Petra shrugged. "I think you're making too big of a deal out of it," she said. "I mean, it's a bit long, but it's about the same length as mine or Hange's and we're fine."

"Is everybody just going to ignore the fact that he said 'the ODMs'?" Marco asked.

"You know what, Marco?" Jean muttered, slumped so low that the back of his neck was touching the seat of the couch. "At this point, I really don't care."

Mikasa pinched a strand beneath her fingers, frowning at it. "Okay, fine," she said. "I'll cut it. How short should I go, do you think?"

Jean watched as they continued walking, mouth hanging open, entire figure dark with shadows.

"Ouch," Mike muttered. "Young love, am I right?"

"The hell do you mean, 'love'?" Levi scoffed. "They just met. He doesn't even know her name yet."

Connie sauntered past him, eyes closed, humming cheerfully, a smile on his face. "Uh?!" Jean reached forwards, wiping his hand on the back of his shirt. "What the hell?" Connie demanded, swivelling his head around, trying to look at what Jean had wiped on him. "Leave my clothes alone, damnit!" leapt around, twisting his arms to wipe at his back. "What'd you wipe on me?"

There was a noise of doom as Jean stared forwards, eyes dull, expression closed off. "Don't worry," he said blandly, voice monotonous. "Just my faith in humanity."

Raucous laughter exploded throughout the room. Ymir howled, falling from the couch and landing face-first in the carpet, shoulder shaking as she howled.

"Shut the fuck *up!*" Jean roared, as Sasha fell into his shoulder, shrieking with mirth. "I hate you all!"

A flame flickered in a brazier, casting a weak haze of light over the compound as crickets chirped and Sasha stumbled forwards, swaying as she walked. "I'm finished," she wheezed, collapsing, first to her knees, then her stomach. She closed her eyes, cheeks tinged pink, sweat beading her skin.

"You good, there?" Petra frowned.

"*No*."

The fire sputtered, embers drifting into the air, as a figure began approaching out of the darkness.

"Who's that?" Hange asked. Nobody responded, but Ymir did rolled her eyes.

Sasha's nostrils twisted a few times before, suddenly, her eyes flew open, glowing with bright red intensity.

"Sweet Maria!" Eld jumped in his seat.

"Son of a bitch!" Mike flailed his arms, falling back. "What the *fuck?*"

"I like food," Sasha defended herself.

Krista screamed, tumbling to the side, waterskin clutched to her chest, as Sasha leapt through the air, knocking her down.

"Krista!" Jean cried. "Where'd you come from?"

She gasped as she stared at Sasha, eyes as wide as her mouth, as the other girl growled, crouched on all fours, eyes still blazing. Her eyes widened, as she looked down on what she clutched in her mouth. *Could it be?*

"Sina's tits," Levi muttered, pressed up against the back of the couch, eyes wide. "What are you, a wild animal?"

"It's bread!" she screeched, yanking it from her mouth and looking up, brows furrowed, lips tense in utmost seriousness.

Eren burst into laughter. "Seriously?" he gasped, shoulders shaking. "How can you say *that* with a straight face?"

"I was hungry!" she protested.

"You're *always* hungry," Jean said, rolling his eyes.

"I—I'm sorry there isn't more," Krista stuttered, still kneeling on the ground, shoulders raised as she watched Sasha warily. "It's all I could take." Sasha stared, looking at the other girl, seemingly noticing her for the first time.

"You brought her food, Krista?" Reiner asked. "That was kind of you!" Annie rolled her eyes, and Bertolt put his face in his hands.

"Goddess of the 104th!" Armin smiled. Krista flushed, and Erwin raised his eyebrows.

"Hey, hang on," Krista said. "You really should drink a little water first," she raised the skin. Angelic sounds tinkled through the air as she smiled, the compound around her turning into a glittering haze of pink and orange, glowing white feathers drifting down around her.

"Goddess," Jean repeated Armin's words, shaking his head.

"I am beyond confused," Mike whispered helplessly.

A heavenly choir began singing as Sasha dropped her hands on Krista's shoulders. "You're. . . you're a goddess, aren't you?" she demanded.

"Wh—"

"Glory unto you!" Sasha shrieked as Ymir walked towards them.

"Ymir doesn't even react!" Jean said. "How are you *not* bothered by the weirdness?"

Ymir snorted. “We’ve lived together for three years, and you *still* think I can be easily shaken?” she shook her head. “I’m disappointed, Horsey.”

“What did you just call me—"

“Hey,” the taller cadet said. “Just what are you two girls up to?”

“Huh?” they both glanced up at her. Sasha started, and began tearing into her bread.

“You look like a bread gremlin,” Levi said. “Or a food goblin.”

“You do know that eating that fast isn’t good for you, right?” Moblit said. “If you eat slower, you won’t get full as quick, and you can save food—”

“I like food!” Sasha defended.

“Yeah, a little *too* much, maybe,” Levi snapped. “There was a fucking *famine* going on, or is your head so empty that you just forgot that little detail, spuds-for-brains?”

An awkward silence fell, in which more than a bit of uncomfortable fidgeting and shifting was heard. “Oh,” Sasha said quietly after a moment. “Right.”

“Well, uh,” Krista twisted the neck of the waterskin nervously. “She’s been running all day. Without any food or water.”

“It’s the military,” Mike told her. “You can’t disobey orders just to be kind, or to help people, even if it’s tough. Like Levi said, there was a famine going on, and she’d already stolen food and disrespected a superior.”

Krista shrunk with every word, cheeks colouring. “I—” she bit her lip. “Well—”

“It was just the first day,” Reiner said quickly. “You can’t fault her for that. Besides, that happened ages ago.”

“Still,” Moblit said. “We’re being shown this for a reason.”

“Yeah, and I doubt that reason is so that you can all berate Krista for something she did three years ago,” Ymir interjected before Reiner could speak again.

“Well, you don’t exactly seem to happy in the scene, either, Ymir,” Armin pointed out.

“I see,” Ymir looked down at her. “So you’re trying to be ‘nice’.”

“That’s like what Armin was saying,” Hange said. “You, too, Mike.”

“What do you have against being nice?” Sasha asked.

“Nothing,” Ymir said. “I just think that it’s a waste of time, and, most of the time, just a mask put on by selfish people who’re trying to look better.” Krista frowned, reaching forwards for a cookie. Levi watched her carefully from the corner of his eye.

“Huh?” Krista started.

Sasha gulped down her last mouthful of bread. “Eh. . .” she slumped forwards eyes rolling back, head dropping in Krista’s lap. “Uh. . .” Her eyes drifted shut, some crumbs falling from her face onto Krista’s skirt.

“Okay, I’m not exactly Captain Levi,” Eren began (Levi glared at him), “but that’s gross. I’m sorry, Sasha, but you’re gross. Your eating is gross. What’s the point of wolfing everything down if half of it just gets onto your face or your clothes?”

"Someone else's clothes, in this case," Jean muttered as Sasha spluttered indignantly.

"What's the point of breaking the rules for Potato Girl?" Ymir inquired watching Krista. "That mindless act of kindness gets you absolutely nowhere."

"You really think kindness doesn't matter?" Krista asked quietly.

"I know it is." The older girl didn't elaborate.

The two locked eyes—Krista's, wide and shocked, Ymir's, hooded and full of mysteries. She sighed, closing them. "Whatever." Krista watched as she stepped forwards. "Let's just get her to bed already." Ymir knelt, slinging Sasha easily over her shoulder.

She's strong, Hange thought, raising their eyebrows. *Probably—no,* definitely—*even better now*. They glanced at Ymir, eyes trailing down the fabric of her sleeve hugging wiry muscle. *So why isn't she in the top ten? She's definitely better than Lenz, probably Braus and Springer, too.* They glanced at the TV again. *Probably not important*.

"I'm confused," Krista said as Ymir stood up straight. "Are you being nice?"

"I just *said* that I don't care about being nice," Ymir growled. "Do you have selective hearing, or something?"

"Oh, yeah?" Sasha countered. "What would you do if one of us was in a Titan's mouth?"

"Run," Ymir shot back. "I'm not stupid."

"But you joined the Corps," Connie said. "So—"

"Do not use the 'stupid by default' argument, or so help me. . ." Ymir warned.

Ymir looked at her. "I'm helping her so that she'll owe me one in the future," she said. She chuckled as she glanced at her. "I intend to make use of her stupidity."

"That's. . . ominous," Petra said. "Sasha, what did she make you do?"

"Nothing!" Sasha said. "I don't think she's ever mentioned that to me, even."

All eyes turned to Ymir. "What?" she demanded.

"'Not nice', you said," Jean snorted. "Bet you're eating your words right now."

"Eating words," Sasha mused. "If only that were possible. . . hey, do you think the word 'steak' would taste like steak, or have its own taste?"

"Well, that got weird real quick," Mike muttered.

A drum echoed through the air as the sun shone over the training grounds glinting off the metal of the barbed wire fences, the wooden structures casting shadows in the early morning.

"It's aptitude test time, so listen up!" Shadis announced standing in front of a contraption of three poles leaned together, arms behind his back. "There is no place for you here if you cannot perform!" Across the yard, cadets struggled, belts chafing their limbs, wobbling as they pitched on the wires, unused to the third dimension of movement. "Fail, and be shipped to the fields."

"Oh, so we're seeing *this*!" Jean grinned. Eren groaned. "Ah," Jean continued, smiling. "To think I thought I'd never be able to see this again. . . thanks, Omni!" he added, waving at the god. She shot him a thumbs-up, not looking up from her book.

"Oh, shut it, Equestrian Freak!" Eren snapped. "I *did* get it, eventually, and it was because of my broken gear, remember? Plus," he added, tilting his chin up. "I managed to balance, even *with* messed-up belts, so—"

"Yeah, yeah, no one cares," Ymir interrupted, waving her hand at him. "We just wanna see you wipe out again."

"I have a feeling I'm gonna enjoy this," Gunther whispered to Eld. He grinned, and they fist-bumped.

"We're just drilling the fundamentals here," the aged officer explained as he and his blond companion walked up to a group of cadets. "You can still determine a cadet's knack for it just by watching."

"Ah," Hange leaned back in their beanbag chair, grinning. "The good ol' aptitude test! I remember this!"

"Hell on earth," Moblit whimpered.

"Two kinds of people," Sasha hissed to Jean, nodding at the pair.

"I remember taking this," Mike said, stroking his mustache. "Came pretty easily to me. What about you, Erwin?"

"It took a while to find my balance, but I ended up doing pretty well," Erwin replied.

"What about you Lev—oh, wait, sorry," Hange cut themself off. "You didn't take it. Forgot."

"You didn't?" Petra looked at the captain in surprise. "How? It was so hard to lear, even *after* we did months of balance practice!"

He shrugged. "I just kinda figured it out," he said. Petra frowned, but didn't press.

"Hm?" the man glanced to the side and nodded, smiling. "Like her."

Mikasa hung from the cables, hair freshly cut to brush her jaw, looking utterly bored as she hovered, barely moving. "She inherently knows what to do, and how to make it happen." Another instructor stood by the crank, arms crossed, watching approvingly. "That's what aptitude is all about."

"That's our Mikasa!" Sasha grinned. "Always the best at everything!"

"Seriously, it should be illegal to be this good," Connie nodded.

"She was even strong as a kid!" Jean said. "Seriously, how is this fair?"

Connie waved his arms frantically, floundering back and forth, but still upright, while Sasha swung back and forth, smiling pleasantly, and Jean hovered, shock-stiff, jerking occasionally as his body shifted. "I'd say we have several capable cadets this year."

"Are you—" Krista giggled into her hand. "Sasha, are you *swinging?*"

"What?" she asked. "It was fun!"

“You’ve gotta have great balance to be able to do that,” Mike said. “And on your first day, too!”

“Huh,” Hange scratched their chin. “You know, I’m starting to see why you were all in the top ten.”

The blond instructor turned to the side and pointed. “And what about this guy?” he asked.

“Ah. . .” The greying instructor turned, and smiled. “That’s precisely why we run these tests,” he said, reaching up and pushing his glasses a bit higher up his nose. “He proves that drive and dedication do not always translate into capability.” Eren hung upside down, eyes wide as his legs kicked the air, frantically trying to right himself.

Jean let out a screech of laughter, gripping his stomach, and Eren turned a furious shade of red. “Shut up!” he yelled. “It’s not that funny!”

“Oh, *shit*, Eren, it is!” Ymir cackled, slapping the seat of the couch. “Damn, and I thought it was funny *before!*”

“Eren,” Gunther said. “I know you had a broken belt, but, still. . .” he gestured helplessly at the screen. “How is it possible to mess up *that badly?*”

“What is your major malfunction, Jaeger?” Shadis demanded, kneeling to yell at him. “Straighten yourself up!”

“I *tried!*” Eren protested. His arguing with the TV only served to fuel the fire that was the howls of laughter from his comrades. “Armin!” he cried as he spotted the blond’s shoulders quivering. “You, too?!”

“Sorry. . .” There were tears flowing down Armin’s face as he tried to supress the giggles. "I didn’t laugh the first time, ‘cause I was worried, but, now that I know you pass—” He started giggling. “I’m sorry!” he repeated, though the effect of his apology was dampened by his laughter. “It’s just—” his words became incoherent as he gripped his stomach. Eren threw his hands into the air, resigning defeat.

Why am I*. . . The other cadets giggled as Eren stared at them, the world completely—and literally—upside down. *How do I work this thing?* His eyes were wide as he swung back and forth, fingers dragging on the ground as he hung. *This can’t be happening!

“Oh, but it *is!*” Sasha howled.

“We have high-res pictures,” Omni offered. “Great quality, all the details captured. Memes, too, if you want them.”

“I have no idea what half those words mean,” Jean said. “But yes.”

Information Available for Public Disclosure

“You know, I’ve been wondering about these info cards,” Gunther said. “What are they here for, really? I mean, other than episode breaks.”

“Most of the information on it is either already known, or not very helpful.” Petra nodded.

“Maybe we’ll learn some more things as the episodes go on,” Erwin said. “This *is* going into the future, after all.”

Omni-Directional Mobility Gear Training, Part 1

“Hey, Omni,” Eren said suddenly. “Were you named for the ODMs? Is that why you were assigned to help us? Because you were born for our universe—uh, SK99?”

“SK909HI,” Omni corrected, staring at her fingernails, looking bored. “And, no. I was named Omni because my parents needed a specific sound to address me by. And I *wasn’t* assigned to this room—it’s just a coincidence, because Bob’s a world-hopping dumbass.”

“And, for the last time,” Marco sighed. “It’s not ‘the ODMs’.”

“Hey—Shifter does as Shifter likes.”

Human beings generally move about in two dimensions. The harsh ODM gear training regimen is meant to help one adapt to movements in three dimensions.

“That’s a very good image,” Erwin said. “For helping us understand the meaning, I mean.”

Hange nodded. “The person in the ball is good imagery,” they said. “‘Cause, when you’re in the air, you really *do* just kinda. . . roll around.”

“That explains the three years’ training, I guess,” Jean said. “And all the physical training beforehand. We had to build up a ton of muscle before using the gear for the first time, and, even after that, it still burnt like hell.”

Omni-Directional Mobility Gear Training, Part 2

***Training requires great physical strength, leg strength, spatial perception. . . and the mental fortitude to remain calm at all times*.**

“It’s like what you were saying, Jean,” Marco said. “You can’t use ODM if you don’t have enough muscle built up. You’ll just flip over mid-air and crash into a tree, or something.”

“The point about the legs is important, too,” Mike said. “Not just strength—we’re landing on different textures at different speeds all the time. Breaking your legs is a massive risk—you need to be flexible enough to absorb the impact, but also strong enough to handle it.”

Clouds drifted overhead as the sun began setting, the sky a watercolour palette of orange and blue. “Just remember the basics and you should be fine,” Mikasa advised. “No need to try any fancy manoeuvres.” She stood in front of Eren as Armin locked him into the aptitude machine.

“You guys are helping him?” Oluo raised his eyebrows. “I would’ve just ditched him as a lost cause.”

"Yeah, well, that's you," Petra said, slapping him on the back of the head. "What the—you weren't even *talking*, how did you bite your tongue?!"

"Just focus on your balance," she continued. "Then distribute your weight evenly between the belts on your waist and your legs."

"That's all really good advice," Moblit said, eyebrows shooting up. "You had that figured out after only one session?"

"Seems this class is full of all sorts of prodigies," Mike chuckled as Mikasa turned slightly pink from the phrase.

"I—" she coloured slightly. "The others were good, too. It just clicked."

It just clicked. Levi stared at her. *Could it be. . ?* He shook his head. *There's no way*. Coincidences happened all the time—this was just another one.

But, still, her strength was so *similar*—

"Loosen up your stance a little bit," Armin added. "If I could do it, I know that you can!"

"Oh, yeah, we never saw yours," Hange said. "How did you do?"

"Pretty good," he flushed. "I guess I mean, I managed to stay upright the whole time—"

"Rude," Eren snorted through a smile. Mikasa slapped him on the back of the head.

"Okay," Eren said nervously. "A loose stance, but balanced. Let's give it a shot Armin."

Armin nodded and grabbed the crank, turning it with a small grunt. Eren raised his arms as the cables began rising up and his feet lifted off the ground.

"Wh—" Eren yelled as he suddenly began pitching back and forth, and, with a final shout, swung forwards, forehead slamming on the ground with a *crash*, blood flying from his wound.

"Ouch!" Mike winced, and a few people rubbed their foreheads sympathetically.

"How exactly was your belt broken?" Hange asked, the engineer in them taking over. "I mean, I've seen broken belts before, but, most of the time, the problem is either obvious, or becomes so very quickly. The interior mechanism is all really well-protected, so how could it have been messed up?"

"He's steady for a few seconds before tipping," Moblit pondered. "So maybe there's something wrong with the balance? But the way he falls, it's like there's something in there that's moving. . ."

"You guys *do* know we fixed the problem, right?" Eren asked, but neither soldier acknowledged him.

Gunther sighed, shaking his head. "When they get like this, there's not getting them out. It's like Titans, but. . . but. . ." He frowned.

"With *math*." Oluo shuddered, and Eld made a gagging motion.

“Hey, Daz,” a dark-haired cadet sneered. “He was talking big about butchering all the Titans, but he got real quiet after ODM training, didn’t he?”

“Ugh,” Eld rolled her eyes. “So they’re *those* kids.”

“Hate ‘em,” Levi grunted, crossing his arms. “They’re all talk, no action. Put them in front of a Titan, and all you’ll get is a steaming pile of shit and sobs.”

“Eren was kind of one of those kids early on,” Armin said. “But he sobered up pretty quickly after his epice fail on the first day.” He frowned, then, as an afterthought, added: “Pretty sure that’s a good thing.”

“What, that I got hurt?” Eren crossed his arms indignantly.

“No, that you stopped being a dumbass, dumbass,” Jean rolled his eyes.

“I guess it’s the fields for him tomorrow,” Daz snickered. An image of Mikasa and Armin lugging the unconscious brunette up a hill, his arms thrown over their shoulders, Mikasa calling out, brow furrowed, and Armin all but screeching, tears in his eyes.

“Oh, my god,” Ymir laughed. “That’s totally gonna be them in the future when they go out drinking together.”

“*Oh*, lord,” Jean snorted. “Drunk Eren. Imagine that.” He leapt to his feet and squared his shoulders, marching around the room, fists clenched by his sides. “Come at meh, teetans!” he roared, wobbling as he began waving his arms. “Imma kill y’all!”

“It’s kind of scary how accurate that looks,” Marco muttered.

“Eren,” Sasha said, looking at the Shifter with a look of complete seriousness. “I am asking this for the good of you, me, everybody in this room, and the whole of humanity: please, please, *please*, never get wasted.”

“The effects of alcohol on a Titan. . .” Hange said, tapping their cheekbone with their pen. “That’s actually really interesting! Hey, Levi—”

“No,” Levi said.

“But I haven’t said anything!” they protested.

“Hange, I swear to Fritz, if I see you so much as *look* at a bottle—"

“Can’t keep wasting food on the useless,” Daz said mockingly.

“Ouch,” Marco said. “Gotta suck, having your own words thrown back at you.”

“Good thing they were wrong,” Eren nodded.

Eren stared into space, a bandage wrapped around the top of his head, eyes wide and unseeing, a small but steady trail of steam rising from beneath the wrappings.

“He’s *steaming!*” Hange shouted, leaping to their feet. “He’s healing! How did none of you notice that?”

Armin leaned forwards. “You’re right!” he says. “The camera even follows the steam!”

“So they’re trying to draw our attention to it,” Erwin nodded. “Hange, it looks like the TV’s just confirming your theory about Eren becoming a Shifter.”

"The question is, *how?*" Hange asked, scratching their head. "We know it probably has something to do with the syringe—but what's in it? Can it be made? Or is it just. . . I dunno, something *from* a Titan?"

Bertolt and Reiner exchanged an alarmed look. "I doubt it would be *from* a Titan," Reiner said. The veterans turned around to look at him. "I mean," Reiner said, expression calm and composed, despite the sweat pooling in his palms. "Everything from a Titan evaporates, right?"

"Hm." Hange frowned, looking crestfallen. "I guess you're right."

"Eren." The boy let out a yelp as Mikasa gripped his shoulder, a crunching noise sounding out.

"Holy Rose, Mikasa," Jean muttered. *If that's how she shows her affection, then I'm actually kind of glad she doesn't like me*.

"Worrying won't solve a thing," Armin said, another cadet looking over his shoulder, snickering quietly under his breath. "There's still time to get some practice in, come morning."

"Did nobody think to check his belt?" Petra asked. "I mean, I know that a lot of people mess up, or just can't use the ODM, but, I mean, all that time practicing, and you never noticed?"

Armin shook his head. "It wasn't even noticeable," he said. "It was on the inside of the belt. It must have been a manufacturing issue."

"How pathetic," Eren said quietly. "How am I supposed to kill 'em if I can't even stand up straight?"

"Never thought you'd be the kind to let a little thing like that put you down," Levi said. "Thought you'd just plough it like you do everything."

Eren flushed. "I was. . . uh, disappointed?" Levi rolled his eyes.

"It might be time to let that dream die," Mikasa spoke, just as quiet.

Erwin raised his eyebrows. *Interesting*.

"Huh?" Both boys looked at her.

"What do you mean?" Eren asked.

"I think you should give up this attempt to be a soldier," Mikasa said, louder this time. "There's a lot more to fighting and combat than just throwing your life away in vain."

"That's true," Gunther muttered.

Mikasa shifted awkwardly in her seat, thinking back to the Battle of Trost. *I couldn't even follow my own advice. Even worse: I lead people to their deaths, and didn't even care*. She clenched her fists. *Not anymore*, she vowed. *I have to be better*.

How can I protect if I can't even save myself?

“What are you saying?” Eren demanded, turning to look at her, glaring at her profile as she stared down at the table. “After everything we saw that day, after what happened to Mom, you’re crazy if you think I’m just going to walk away.”

“Ah, there’s our Suicidal Dumbass,” Ymir said.

“I get it,” Mikasa said, still looking at her bowl. “But it doesn’t matter how determined you are.”

“It— wait, what do you mean?” He paused mid-sentence, frowning.

“That is also true,” Eld sighed. “It’s like that instructor dude said earlier—drive doesn’t equate strength, or ability. You could have the greatest ideas in the world, but be a terrible artist, or dream about being a great performer, but not have the voice for singing. You really can’t decide what you’re born with.”

“Yeah, well, in this case, it’s just a broken belt,” Oluo said. “I mean, that was deep and all—”

“Oh, shut up,” the second-in-command snapped, smacking the back of his head.

Mikasa looked up at him. “Because whether or not you’re fit to be a soldier isn’t up to you.”

“That’s basically what you just said, Eld,” Petra said.

“Eh—” Eren grit his teeth as the bell began ringing. Dishes and tin clattered as the other cadets stood, moving to put their cutlery away.

“Why do you guys always wait to have the meaningful moments until right before the bell?” Ymir asked. “I mean, we didn’t get to see the Horse versus Titan smackdown, and now Eren’s gonna march off before listening to Mikasa.”

“Huh?” Eren looked at her. “What do you mean? She didn’t say anything.”

Armin groaned, smacking his forehead. Mikasa looked away, focusing pointedly on the TV.

“You misunderstand,” Mikasa said, looking down at the table.

“Come on,” Eren said, ignoring her and standing up.

“Did you seriously not hear her?” Eld demanded, throwing his hands in the air.

“Uh. . .” Eren stared at the TV, completely confused.

“Wh—oh, okay,” Armin stood, following him.

“I’m not saying you should return to the fields by yourself,” the girl continued, oblivious to the other two leaving. “I wouldn’t dream of it. Because where ever you go, I’m going to go with you.”

“Oh,” Sasha said, flushing. “So *that*’s what you were talking about.”

Eren flushed. At the time, he’d assumed she meant he should just leave and give up his dream. *I never thought she’d follow me. But,* he frowned. *Now that I think back on it, she’s always followed me, hasn’t she? She joined the Cadets, and, later, the Corps. . . all for me*. He furrowed his brows. *Why? It can’t just be because of the promise to my mom. Repayment for. . .*

back then? He shook his head. *No way—she's saved my life countless times over. If anything, I'm in* her *debt.* He glanced at her. *So* why*?*

Mikasa turned and came face-to-face with Sasha, staring at her, completely confused.

Sasha flushed. Connie snorted into his hand, and Jean elbowed him.

"Wrong brunette," Ymir snorted.

"Eh. . ." The two girls sat in the very corner of the empty dining room, the candle on the table the only one lit. "So, uh, are you saying. . ." she pointed at a small loaf of bread on the table. "That you're not going to finish that?"

"No, Sasha, she was not," Jean said dryly.

"How did you get 'eat my bread' from *that*?" Mike asked.

She flushed. "I was. . . hungry?"

"You're *always* hungry," Ymri stated, rolling her eyes.

"Aren't you still on a food ban?" Hange asked.

"Uh. . ."

"Did you give her the bread?" Moblit asked Mikasa.

Zither music began playing as the other cadets left the building and Mikasa held up the bread, glancing at Sasha. The brunette reached for it, eyes sparkling, but, before she could reach it, Mikasa shoved it into her own mouth, taking a bite.

"That was too mean!" Sasha wailed while the others laughed at her expense.

"Well, she was, technically, just following orders," Armin shrugged, hiding a smile.

"Good for you, Mikasa!"

Sasha stared, eyes wide, mouth still open in a half-smile, hand hanging limply in front of her, then snapped her mouth shut, staring at Mikasa stonily, dark, murderous rage boiling beneath her impassive demeanor.

"Here's a question for you guys," Hange said. "Who do you think would win—angry Mikasa or food-crazed Sasha."

Eren gasped, and Armin choked on his milk.

"Oh, please, Sina, no," Ymir groaned, covering his face.

"Scary," Krista whimpered, covering her face.

"What's the trick to posture control?" Connie smirked, looking to the side. "Hard to say. Guess I got the gift. You've just gotta feel it, you know?"

"Dude," Eren stared at him. "You were flailing your arms."

"Yeah?" Connie crossed his arm. "At least I wasn't face-first on the ground!"

"It was a *broken belt!*" Eren protested. "A broken belt! Are you guys never gonna let me live that down?"

"No!" Ymir called.

“I’m trying to figure out *your* trick,” Jean sneered, brows lopsided, grinning goofily. “You’ve screwed up every way imaginable, short of an accidental equipment-related asphyxiation.”

“Don’t jinx it!” Ymir screeched.

“What the hell is wrong with your face?” Levi scowled. “Constipation got you, too?”

“Wh—” Jean turned varying shades of white, green, and red.

“Don’t worry,” Hange told him soothingly. “He’s always like this.”

“One day, four-eyes, those shitty glasses are going down your throat.”

“Please, guys,” Eren pleaded, stepping forwards. “You gotta help me, I’m begging you!” Armin grabbed his arm, holding him back, but that didn’t stop him from leaning forwards, sweat rolling down his face.

“Wow,” Jean snickered. “To think I would never see Desperate Eren again. A great improvement from Know-it-All Eren, I must say.”

“Say that again!” Eren cried, leaping up from his seat, fists already raised.

“Eren, sit down!” Armin pleaded, clinging onto his shirt. “You can’t fight him about what’s true!”

“Armin! I thought you were on my side!”

“That’s funny,” Connie commented, turning back, as Armin held his hands up between Eren and the other boys. “Wasn’t it just yesterday you said, ‘if you can’y handle the pressure, you’ve got to leave’?” Eren started, gritting his teeth. “No, wait. . .” Connie mused. “Or was it, ‘if you’re a complete idiot, you’ve got to leave’?” The camera closed in on Eren’s face as he panted, eyes full of desperation. “Something like that.”

“Sucks when you’re on the receiving end, huh?” Ymir snorted.

“Yeah, you were definitely one of *those* kids,” Eld sighed. “Glad you got better, at least.”

“Oh, come on!” Eren pleaded, leaning forwards. “I heard from everyone you’re both really good at it! Bertolt! Reiner!”

The four boys sat on a bunk, Armin and Eren facing Bertolt and Reiner. Reiner sighed, arms crossed. “Sorry, kid. But there isn’t any special trick to just hanging there. Not to be harsh,” he added. “But if it’s advice you want, I’m not really the guy.”

“Don’t be like that, Reiner,” Eren said. “You both were great! I doubt I ever would’ve been able to hang on without your help.”

Annie nudged Reiner’s ribs. “Why wasn’t I ever told about this?” she hissed under her breath.

“It wasn’t important,” he muttered back.

“Why’d you help?” she demanded. “One less soldier’s all the better for us.”

“Does it matter?” he shot back. “And, anyways—it all ended up working out for us, didn’t it?”

Eren sighed. “All right,” he muttered.

“Let’s just hope it comes to you tomorrow,” Armin said reassuringly. The two made to stand up.

“Huh?” Hange frowned. “I thought you said they help you.”

“They do,” Armin said. “Just keep watching.”

“Hold on,” Bertolt said suddenly. “Aren’t the two of you originally from Shinganshina?” The two glanced at him.

“Yeah, that’s right,” Armin said, sitting back down.

“Then,” Bertolt said, Reiner watching him. “You know first-hand how terrifying they are. Why on earth would you want to be soldiers?”

“*Oh*,” Hange said quietly, though not enough that the rest of them didn’t hear them. “That’s why.”

Armin and Eren glanced at each other. “I didn’t see the things Eren did,” Armin admitted. “He saw their bloodlust first-hand, before anyone realised how bad it was. And, I. . .” Eren looked back at Reiner and Bertolt as Armin continued. “I knew I couldn’t sit idly by as the Royal Government forced the citizenry into the failed Territory Retrieval Operation.” Images of the Expedition from the last episode flashed on screen.

Armin bit his lip. Eren bumped his shoulder comfortingly, and Mikasa placed a hand on his elbow.

“I see,” Bertolt said quietly.

“So, where are the two of you from?” Armin asked.

Bertolt lowered his head. “Oh, Reiner and I? We were both from a mountain village just Southeast of Wall Maria.”

Bertolt winced, and Reiner stared at the TV dully.

Ah, Mike thought. *So we’re going to be seeing their story, now*.

“Hm?” Eren and Armin whipped around to stare at him. “But. . .” Armin said. “Then, that means. . .”

“Yeah,” Bertolt pulled his knees to his chest, lowering his head. “Unlike the more prosperous river towns, our village didn’t receive word right away.”

“That must have been horrible,” Krista said quietly. “Titans are bad enough, but just having them appear one day out of nowhere, with no idea about what was happening. . .” *It would like a scene from the worst nightmare*.

He glanced up at them. “The Titans were on us before we even knew what was going on.” He looked to the side, a bead of sweat on his face. “It happened at dawn,” he said quietly. “All the livestock were so restless. Soon after, we heard these strange rumblings that just became louder and louder.” A flame pulsed steadily in a lamp hanging from a ceiling beam as he spoke.

“Is this a flashback?” Armin asked. Reiner and Bertolt glanced at each other, eyes wide.

"Uh—yeah," Bertolt nodded. "That's—" he glanced at Reiner, "—my house. Was," he corrected quickly.

"Eventually, I realised the rumblings were the sound of death getting closer." A rumbling noise echoed through the air as the scene faded to show a dark window, the pane shaking with each rumble. "I, uh, I looked out my window, and. . ." A young Bertolt stood at the window as a Titan peered in, grinning and silhouetted against the sunlight.

"How did you survive?" Petra gasped. "I've seen Scouts killed from further distances!"

"I don't—" Bertolt bit his lip. "I don't really remember," he fumbled. "I think I just, uh, ran."

Armin swallowed, watching him with wide eyes. "After that, well, uh, everything is just a blur," Bertolt said. "I think we all just panicked."

"Hey," Reiner said. "Easy, now. You're just getting yourself worked up again."

"That's right," Eren muttered. "You're all from the same village."

"I'm sorry about what happened to your home," Hange told them.

"Why?" Annie asked dully. "It wasn't your fault." *You can't apologize for a lie*.

"Sorry," Bertolt said. "Basically," he said, turning back to Eren. "What I've been trying to say is this. The four of us aren't like the rest of. . . of them."

"'Them' who?" Armin asked.

"The others here, who have never been witness to the Titan's horror," Bertolt replied.

"Hey," Reiner said again, grabbing Bertolt's arm.

"Well, it's true," Sasha said. "I never really understood why the rest of you were so worked up about the Titans until Trost. It was. . ." she winced. "Well, it was a real eye-opener." Connie and Jean muttered their agreement, and Krista nodded.

"That reminds me," Moblit said, glancing over. "We never found out where you were from, Ymir." Hange whirled around, staring at the girl with the officer.

Ymir met their gazes steadily. "Does it matter?" she asked.

"Well, we're all here, for one," Hange supplied. "And it never hurts to get to know each other."

Ymir shrugged. "Nothing important. I lived in a Wall Church for a while, before joining up."

"What?" Krista looked at her. "You were a Wallist? But I thought—"

"I *wasn't*," she said. "I just lived in the church."

Hange frowned, but didn't press. Krista continued staring at her, eyes wide, brows furrowed.

A dark-haired boy climbed down a ladder, passing by a blond cadet lounging on his bunk and two more beneath him, chatting, a faint noise buzzing in the background. A group of boys sat on another bunk, one waving his arm, as the noise grew louder and the scene vanished.

"What's that sound?" Petra wondered.

"I dunno," Mike shrugged. "Maybe it's just there for dramatic effect?"

"Most of them are here for show," Bertolt said as the three walked through the camp, green cloaks wrapped around themselves, him leading the others, a lantern in hand. "To do just what society expects. In a world where you're labelled a coward if you choose fieldwork, by the time you turn twelve, propriety demands our service."

"I guess that's true," Eren muttered with a frown. *Now that I think about it, the class had shrunk by a bunch by the last year.* He pursed his lips. *But then why would they show up at all, if they were gonna ditch? Is societal pressure seriously that huge?*

The camera focused on his profile as they passed a hut. "With that said, I'm really no different from the others," Bertolt added. "I joined the ranks hoping for assignment to the Military Police." They walked up a hill, stumbling over rocks hidden in the dark. "Tucked away in the Interior. If that doesn't work out, I'll give up entirely. I don't really have the fortitude for anything else."

"That's not true," Marco said. "You were great during the Battle of Trost, and you're here now, aren't you? As a Scout?"

"I guess," He looked down, avoiding the dark-haired boy's gaze, picking at a cuticle, lips pursed, ignoring the way his hands shook.

The light from the lantern bobbed over the stone path as they walked. "There's no shame in caring about your life, Bertolt," Armin said. "We all do." Bertolt ducked, slipping between two links barbed wire and passing through the fence.

I see that now, Eren glanced down. *But I still—* He sighed, shaking his head. *No. It's not my place to judge. They've got their own reasons. We've all seen the same things, and they have their own ways of dealing with them*.

"I'm going to return to the home that was taken from me," Reiner said, staring straight ahead. Armin and Eren started, looking up at him. "That's all I care about, now." He narrowed his eyes, the shadows form the light cast onto his face making him look decades older. "I will do it. No matter what."

"That's why you joined the Scouts, then?" Erwin asked. "Was that you intention from the very beginning?"

Reiner glanced at Annie. "Yes," he said. "I just wasn't as vocal about it as Eren."

"I really doubt anyone could get *as* vocal as Eren," Ymir scoffed.

Eren watched him, eyes wide. "What about you?" Bertolt asked suddenly, looking over his shoulder. "Why did you sign up?"

Eren looked down, brows drawing together. "Why'd I join?" He thought of Carla being plucked from the rubble of his house like a ragdoll, then crushed in the Smiling Titan's mouth. His eyes blazed with intensity as he glared ahead. "I decided I have to kill them," he spat.

Reiner and Bertolt turned to look at him. "I won't stop 'till every single Titan is dead and rotting. Dead." He glared into space, the lantern's light reflecting off his eyes. "Every last one."

It's kind of frightening, Ymir thought. *His determination. When he starts talking about Titans, it's like he turns into a completely different person. He's. . . angry. It's like he would do anything just to kill a single Titan*. She shivered.

Bertolt stared at him in shock as gentle violin music began playing. "You saw what those monsters are capable of, and you still want to take them on?" he asked as they stopped by a rock face. Bertolt grabbed onto a ledge and began climbing up.

Yes. Eren stared at the TV. *Yes. Over, and over, and over again*.

"Damn right," Eren said as they pulled themselves up. "It's just after screwing up the training, I don't know if I'm cut out to be a soldier."

"Don't be self-pitying," Ymir said blandly. "It's weird. It doesn't suit you."

"I'm not!"

"Uh-huh. And I kissed Jean under a cornflower bush.

Reiner stopped at the edge of a cliff as the clouds parted and the moon shone down, silver beams of light illuminating trees and the glassy blue surface of a lake, shimmering under the shadows of thin, low-hanging clouds. The water glittered beneath the rays of silver, the surface shining like a sea of diamonds, a mesmerizing, deep blue, the trees and mountains reflected in the mirror-smooth water.

"It's beautiful," Sasha gasped, eyes wide.

"It is," Krista breathed.

I wonder why they showed this? Erwin wondered. *Just to show their location? No*. He frowned. *Could it be symbolism? Even during war, life continues, and beauty remains. We can still find peace and joy, even in these days, if we just look*. He shook his head with a small chuckle. *Or maybe I'm just reading too much into a pretty lake*.

"We'll take it from step one:" Reiner said. "Belt adjustment. By tomorrow, you'll be an expert." He turned, smiling at Eren. "I know you've got what it takes. I can see it in you. Am I wrong here?"

"How did Eren manage it at this point?" Hange wondered. "I mean, he was using the same belt, wasn't he? And you guys were all there—didn't you notice something was wrong?"

"Not really," Reiner frowned. "It did take a lot longer than we expected, but he did get it eventually. It just seemed way worse on the actual machine."

"Huh," Hange furrowed their brows. "Weird.'

"No!" Eren smiled. "I won't fail. Thank you, Reiner."

The music really is lovely, Marco thought, smiling slightly. *I wasn't even there, but the way the scene plays out, along with the melody. . . well, it's nostalgic*.

A dramatic drum beat began playing as the aptitude mechanism was shown. A drop of sweat rested on Eren's face as he stared ahead determinedly, Shadis glaring down at him as he was hooked onto the cables. "Eren Jaeger," he said. "Are you ready?"

"You actually got a second chance?" Petra exclaimed. "Wow, you were lucky!"

"Yes, sir!" Eren nodded, the hooks on his belt jingling. *I'm going to do it*. His eyes were wide as he looked ahead, Reiner, Bertolt, and Armin looking on nervously. *I have to!* Mikasa watched carefully. *I may not be as talented as the rest. But nobody, nobody, has more guts!*

"That's true, at least," Krista chuckled.

Shadis stared down at him, scrutinizing. "Proceed!" he commanded.

The cables creaked as another cadet began pulling the crank, and Eren's feet lifted off the ground. He raised his arm as he was lifted higher. *The moment of truth*. He shifted his weight, turning to the side. The other cadets watched, Shadis's brow furrowed, lips downturned. *I won't fail again*. Reiner and Bertolt's eyes were wide, Armin and Mikasa's lips parted, expressions of shock on their faces, as he remained steady. *To hell with working the damn fields!*

"The music's so. . . pumpy," Connie said. "Ya know. Get pumped! I'm all pumped up!" He punched his fists into the air.

"It's kind of like a battle theme, almost," Moblit agreed. "'Pumpy', indeed."

I'm not giving up.* He threw his arms out to the sides, the camera flashing through his movements using dramatic angles as thematic music began playing. *Not without a fight!

Cheers rang through the air as Eren grit his teeth, staying upright.

"Wow!" Eld said. "You actually managed to balance on a broken belt?"

Levi raised his brows. "Not bad, kid," he muttered.

"Yeah!" Oluo said quickly, crossing his arms. "I mean, I suppose that's okay, for the battlefield, and all. But to be a *real* Scout—*eurf!*" Eld grabbed his jaw before he could bite down on his tongue again.

"Wow, Keit does *not* look happy," Mike chuckled. "Do you reckon he had a bet on Jaeger's failure or something?"

I did it?* Eren's feet jerked as his balance was shifted, but not lost. *No, I'm doing it!* He suddenly gasped as his cables twisted. *No! Not yet!

"There goes that," Eld sighed.

"It is strange," Hange said. "Normal ODM failures wouldn't even have let you balance in the first place. It's like there's something inside the belt that you're barely keeping in place, and the smallest movement can dislodge it."

"Well, that's pretty much what happened," Eren said. "Like we said, it was a broken wire."

"Huh," Hange scratched their ponytail. "And how exactly was it broken? Was it snapped? Or bent?"

"Uh. . ." Eren furrowed his brows. "I don't remember. But I guess you'll be seeing it in a sec."

He screamed as he was suddenly flipped backwards, hitting the ground with a *clunk*. His friends gasped, and Shadis grunted, eyes narrowing. "Once more!" Eren cried, legs flailing as he pushed at the ground, hair brushing the dirt, arms pressed into the ground. "I can do it!"

"Well, at least he's learned enough to not hit his head, this time," Moblit offered.

"Congratulations!" Ymir said mockingly. "You can fall! What?" she said, noticing Mikasa's glare. "We know he's fine."

Shadis blinked. "Lower him," he said expressionlessly.

Eren collapsed to his hands and knees, staring at the ground, wide-eyed. "I. . ." he sat up, sitting on his heels, staring ahead blankly. His lip quivered, entire body shaking, eyes filling with tears. "I'm finished!"

"Hey, Omni!" Jean called, looking at the TV Spirit. "Have you got pictures of this, too?"

"Sure do!" Omni called back.

"What?!" Eren protested. "Come on! At least say you've got weird things of Jean, too!"

"Oh, we've got 'em of all of you!" Omni cackled.

"Oh, shit," Connie groaned, putting his face in his hands.

Shadis looked up, ignoring his groans. "Wagner!" he said. "Please exchange belts with Mr. Jaeger."

"How did Keith know it was about the belt?" Mike asked.

"Maybe it was seeing Eren's balance?" Armin suggested. "He could have just guessed."

"Maybe," Mike frowned. "Still, that would've been a pretty wild guess."

"Huh?" Thomas started. "Yes, sir!" His arms snapped to his side, spine straightening in parade rest. Reiner, Bertolt, Armin, and Mikasa watched on, confused.

Eren hovered in the air, completely still, eyes wide with wonder, while the cadets watched on in awe. "Your equipment was defective," Shadis explained as Eren stared at the belts, twisting his arms slightly. "If given a piece of functional gear," Shadis mused, looking up at him. "You might not be worthless, after all." He turned the belt he was holding in his hand, showing it to Eren.

"Yeah, that's definitely snapped," Hange said. "But I doubt it's a manufacturing problem."

"What do you mean?" Eren asked.

"It—" Hange shook their head. "Never mind."

"Quartermaster didn't notice this broken clasp," he said, gesturing to a piece of wire snapped clean in half, poking out of the leather. "Might have to visit the Supply Depot and crack a couple of skulls."

It could *have been messed up in Supply Depot*, Hange thought. *I mean, there have been a few crazy accidents related with gear, after all. But the way that the break looks clean. . . I don't want to accuse anybody, but it's very likely it was broken deliberately.* They frowned. *But who? And why?*

"He. . ." The cadets' eyes were wide. "He still did it," a dark-haired boy said. "Even while wearing that busted gear."

"Amazing," Franz gasped.

"Guess you're a natural, then," Mike said. Eren beamed at the praise.

"So, you mean I. . ." Eren twitched slightly in the air as his belts shifted. "I didn't wash out?"

"Oh, no, you washed out," Ymir said. "It just wasn't completely your fault."

"Rude," Eren snorted.

Shadis watched him, eyes narrowed. "You made the cut," he said. "Now keep training, cadet!"

"Yay, Eren!" Krista clapped.

Eren's eyes widened and he clenched his fists, throwing his hands into the air. *I did it!* he cheered internally, shouting in delight. *I really did it!* Mikasa watched next to Armin, eyes wide, mouth agape. *Check it out, Mikasa! I'm doing it!* He clenched his fists, grinning at her. *I can fight the Titans!* She stared at him, dumbfounded beyond words. *You don't have to worry about me! Not any more!* He beamed in triumph as energetic electric guitar music began playing.

"You know that's not possible," Mikasa said, almost inaudibly. *How can I* not *worry? I just*— She clenched her fists, pulling at the fabric of her pants. *I just can't*.

"*It was like a nightmare, it's painful for me. . .*"

"This song has lyrics, too!" Krista said. "Do you think it's by the same person who sang the opening?"

"No, doesn't sound like it," Erwin shook his head. "But it is an interesting song."

"Lyrics sound depressing as heck," Ymir said. "So, kinda like the opening?"

"It seems like things worked out for him," Reiner commented.

"'*Cause nobody wants to die to fast. . .*"

"That's true," Eren muttered.

"Wow, really?" Jean joked. "With the way you're always running into battle without a second thought, I would've thought the exact opposite!" An awkward silence fell.

"That was a bad joke," Sasha muttered.

"Yeah, I kinda figured," the boy grunted through his teeth.

"Look," Armin grinned. "His eyes are saying, 'Check me out'!"

"They're not," Mikasa said quietly.

"Huh?" the boys looked at her.

"Really?" Connie asked. "Then what is he saying?"

"*Remember days of grief, now it's strange for me*. . ."

"I guess grief does seem strange, after a while," Hange mused. "Eventually, you just need to bury it. Otherwise it gets overwhelming."

Erwin nodded. "I'd say that this song isn't meant for Eren," he said. "Maybe someone else? Or the Corps?"

"It could be for humanity in general," Mike offered.

"His eyes are saying he doesn't have to leave me," Mikasa said. "Not anymore."

Mikasa flushed, tugging her scarf up to hide her face. Jean coughed into his fist and Ymir's eyebrows travelled up to meet her hairline, but neither of them made any comments.

"I mean. . . it's kind of what he's saying," Armin said awkwardly.

Eren shifted on the couch, not meeting Mikasa's gaze. *Does she really care that much?* he asked. *Why, though? Why's she so attached? Is she really that worried I'd leave her behind?*

We need to work on her abandonment issues, Erwin thought. *From what I've read, she's an excellent soldier, but will drop everything and run after Eren on the mere suspicion that he's hurt. That could cause problems on the battlefield*.

"*I can see your face, I can hear your voice*. . ." The boys watched her, confused.

"*Remember the day we met, it's painful for me*. . ."

The lyrics are interesting, Hange thought. *They're extremely personal, but, at the same time, very general. They could be referring to anybody in the room, but, at the same time, every person listening probably has a specific memory or scenario that matches up to them*.

Grisha*. . . Shadis watched Eren, brow furrowed, eyes piercing as the boy cheered himself on. *Today should bring you pride. Your son is a soldier!

"Hold up!" Eren threw his arms in front of him, holding them up in an X. "The Commandant knew Dad?"

"Seriously?" Armin's eyes were wide.

"Maybe he knows what happened to him," Krista suggested.

Erwin nodded. "We'll definitely talk to him after this," he promised.

"Especially if there's a chance he knows where the good doctor is," Levi said.

"*Because nobody wants to die to fast*." The song continued into the next scene as Shadis galloped through the woods astride a horse, the evening sun shining on the bark of the trees. "*Remember a day we dreamt, it's painful for me*." Three cadets swung by, puffs of gas trailing in the air as they shot through the woods.

"It's a timeskip," Hange reasoned.

Jean nodded. "This is—what, a few months into the future?"

"I remember this," Mikasa nodded. "I think this was one of the final examinations."

"I'm guessing that the episodes are set up to show us only what's really important," Erwin said. "I think it'd be safe to assume that we're going to be moving into the Battle of Trost arc soon, maybe even next episode."

"Right-o, Commander!" Omni said. Erwin looked flattered.

"*I can see your face, I can hear your voice*. . ." Eren propelled himself forwards, doing a backflip between two trees and rocketing into the sky. He shot out his cables, rocketing after Mikasa and throwing himself into the air, above the trees with a cry.

The image froze, showing him in the air, silhouetted against the setting sun and golden sky, as the song ended in an electronic crescendo.

Omni jumped to her feet, grabbing a thin, rectangular object that had appeared on the coffee table and clicked it, freezing the episode as the ending began playing.

"Hey!" Eren protested.

"Oh, hush," Omni snapped. "Okay, here's the deal—the episodes you're watching right now are part of what's called the first 'season' of episodes. Basically, it's a bundle of arcs, the events of which are more or less linked to each other. For example, this is the first season, and the start of the series, so it begins at the Fall of Shinganshina—" Eren bit the inside of his mouth, and Mikasa tugged at a tassel of her scarf, "—and continues all the way to a point in the future, about. . ." She pulled out her rectangle and glanced at the screen. "A month from now, in your time."

"I see," Erwin said. "I'm guessing you're not allowed to tell us about the future?"

"Nah," she shook her head. "Here's the thing, though—the next episode's gonna be a huge turning point."

"The start of the Battle of Trost," Jean guessed, face grim.

"Yeah, that," Omni nodded. "But, before that, you've got another option. There are three extra episodes you've got the option to watch—OVAs, they're called. Original Video Animations. They're not, strictly speaking, critical to the future, but they will help you understand each other better, and, maybe, serve as a sort of relaxer before we get into the gritty stuff. You've got a choice here," she continued, holding up two fingers. "We can watch the OVAs right now, and then continue on with the main storyline, or," she put down one finger, "we can keep watching the main season, and watch the OVAs once the final episode is done." She shrugged. "Either way, you're gonna have to watch them."

The soldiers glanced at Erwin, and Levi shrugged. "I think," Erwin said. "We should probably just watch the OVAs right now. Like Omni said, we're going to be continuing into the future, meaning that there'll probably be a lot of stuff we'll need to unpack and go over. If we watch them now, then we'll get them out of the way, and we can focus on the future events later on." He looked around. "Are there any objections to that?"

“No,” Mike shook his head. “I think that’s a good plan.” The others muttered their agreement.

Omni nodded. “Okay,” she said. “In the meantime. . .” she reached forwards, pointing the rectangle at the TV. The image on the screen blinked away, and she tossed the rectangle over her shoulder (it vanished just before it hit the ground). “You guys need to take a break,” she said. “You’re not used to bluelight or screens, and you’ve been sitting here for an hour straight.” She gestured around the room. “Get up, go and explore the apartment, or something. Stretch your legs, give yourselves a break from the screen.”

Eren frowned. “But—”

She waved a hand at him. “It’s fine,” she said. “I’ll call you back in about ten minutes. Now, go!” she said, seeing that they all remained seated. “Take a break, for heaven’s sake! The last thing I need is to fill out more paperwork explaining why all the characters need glasses!”

Interlude – 1. Room 13

"Look at this shit," Eren muttered, dragging his fingers along the railing as they walked up the spiral stairs to the second floor. "Is this all from the Homepage?"

"Must be," Armin mused, trailing his hand along the wall. He paused, frowning. "Is this. . . paper?"

Sasha poked at the wall. "It is!" she said. "That's so weird!"

Jean glanced up at the wall and started. "What the—hey!"

"Huh?" Connie turned around. "What?"

"That picture!" Jean pointed at a picture: less like the sketches or drawings that they were used to, and more so like the images on the TV—a perfect rendition, a moment frozen in time, completely identical to the real thing, not a detail out of place. "Look! It's Jaeger!"

And, so it was. While the person in the image's back was to the camera, it was, without a doubt, Eren. He wore a Training Corps jacket and held two swords as he stood in the midst of a burning city, silhouetted by the flames surrounding him as he looked up from a pile of rubble at the Colossal Titan as it loomed over the Wall, one hand gripping the Gate, fires burning white-hot sending smoke and sparks into the air around it as it glared down, eyes glowing pinpricks in the darkness. The image was massive—almost the same length as Connie, and as wide as two Kristas standing side-by-side. Over the daunting image, two lines of what they could only assume were letters lay, though they weren't part of any recognizable language that they knew.

"What is this?" Eren asked, reaching a hand out towards the poster, before drawing his hand back, as if it had burnt him.

"Uh. . ." Gunther scratched his head. "Still TV?"

"Then what's the point?" Eld argued. "Maybe it's just decoration."

"Who would put *that* up as decoration?" Eren demanded.

"It's from the Homepage," Omni said, and a few people jumped—she had seemingly materialized right next to them. "It's called a 'poster'. It's for your series." She pointed at the first, and larger, line of letters. "That says 'Attack on Titan'—it's the name of your story. And the little line," she lowered her finger, "says 'Shingeki no Kyojin'. It means the same thing, but it's in Japanese."

"What's a jap-ah-knee?" Connie asked, furrowing his brow.

"Ja-pa-neez," Omni said impatiently. "It's another language. And the big line is in English. They're both languages spoken in the Homepage."

"Languag*es*?" Armin asked, perking up. "Like, plural?"

"There's more than one language in the Homepage?" Hange asked, whipping around, eyes wide, hitting Oluo in the face with their ponytail. "And they can all understand each other?"

“How many languages are there?” Petra asked, eyes the size of dinner plates.

“Thousands,” Omni said with a shrug. “The ou—Homepage is a lot bigger than your tiny space in the Walls, you know.”

“And *everybody* knows *every single one?*” Sasha looked like she was seconds away from collapsing of shock.

“Oh, not *every* one,” Omni said. “But most people know at least two.”

“*Two!*” Mike put his hands on his forehead, scratching at his beard. “*Shit*, man! That’s insane!”

“Wow,” Connie gasped, starry-eyed. “Imagine that! It’d be like. . . like. . . what would it be like, Reiner?” he asked, turning to the older boy.

“Uh—” Reiner blinked, glancing at the stairs from the corner of his eyes as the bald boy turned to him. “I dunno,” he shrugged, putting on an easy grin. “I mean—that’s a lot of words, huh?” he shrugged. “Bet it’d be pretty cool, though, don’t you?” he finished with a smile, nudging Connie’s shoulder.

Omni watched him carefully. “That’s. . . not really the point,” she said, then shook her head. “Whatever.” She waved her hands around. “C’mon. The apartment’s pretty big, but I mainly just want to show you your rooms before we get back to the OVAs.”

“Rooms?” Levi raised his eyebrows.

Omni shot him an exasperated look. “How long do you think it takes to watch a future?” she demanded. “You’re not gonna be able to finish it in a few minutes. Plus, you’re all still functioning human beings—” Annie’s left leg twitched. “—and you need food, and sleep, and all that shit. Breaks, too. The bluelight from the TV can seriously fuck with your eyes.”

Erwin frowned. “How long do you think we’ll be here?” he asked. “I understand that this is important, but. . . well, time still is continuing in our world, isn’t it?”

“Actually, no!” Omni said. Erwin’s eyebrows nearly took flight from his face. “You see, you’re not *in* your universe right now. So time *is* carrying on there, but at the same time, it isn’t. You get my drift?” She was met with blank stares. “Oh, for the love of God,” she sighed, rubbing her forehead. “Let’s put it this way, shall we?” She spread her hands. “You guys were plucked from your world during a specific point in time. And I can put you back at any given spot in your timeline. So there are three ways that this can go: I can put you back in the right spot, your past, or your future. But I’ll put you back in the rights spots, obviously!” she said, quickly holding up her hands. “Basically, time is complicated. But, by the time you get back, it’ll be like you never left at all, got it?”

“Uh. . . yes?” Eren offered.

Omni rolled her eyes, and gestured down the hall. “Whatever,” she grumbled. “My bachelors’s is wasted on you guys. The rooms are down the hall, the doors’ve got your names on them.”

“What a warm, welcoming, host,” Jean muttered, as they trekked down the carpeted hall, splitting off into their various rooms.

Eren closed their door with a sigh, and leaned his head back against the wood, knocking his skull against the painted oak a few times.

“Eren?” Mikasa glanced at him. “Are you okay?”

“*Shit*,” Eren groaned. “How can you ask that?” he looked at her, scowling. “We’ve just had the worst moments of our lives put on display, and you think I’d be *okay?*”

Armin sighed, sitting down on a rocking chair in the corner of the room. “At least one good thing’s come out of this,” he said, rocking back and forth, scanning the room with his eyes. “We’ll be able to see the future. And *change* it.” He shook his head. “I still can’t believe it. I mean, this is all crazy!”

“That, I’ll agree with,” Eren muttered, sitting down heavily on one of the beds—a single, with a thick, black comforter and dark green pillows piled all over it, a shelf full of thin, colourful books hanging over it, and a dark grey, shaded lamp sitting on the nightstand. “This is all nuts.” He rubbed his nose, squeezing his eyes shut. “I’m still half convinced I’m dreaming.”

Mikasa sat down slowly on another bed across the room—her comforter was the same shade of red as her scarf, silky white sheets pulled over the soft mattress matching the pillowcases, and a knitted pink blanket hanging over the wooden headboard, the same colour as the curtain hanging by the nightstand, that she could pull around the entire setup. “It’s strange,” she muttered, picking one of the pillows up and turning it around in her hand. “The way that the—what are they called? Cameras? The way they picked up on everything. Even our thoughts.”

Armin nodded, kicking at the cream-carpeted floor, rocking back and forth. “I don’t understand it,” he muttered. “I’m still having trouble wrapping my mind around the fact that we’re a story. Not real, but. . . real?” He shook his head.

Mikasa hugged the pillow to her chest, rubbing the cover absent-mindedly as Armin stood up, moving to the last bed in the room—simpler than the other two, with only one pillow, and a thick, blue blanket patterned with what looked like tiny kittens. “I’m trying not to think about it,” she said quietly, pinching the corner of the pillow. “*Any* of it, really. But,” she worried her bottom lip, “I’m also kind of concerned. I mean—” she took a deep breath. “They’ve already shown us *so much*. Who’s to say they can’t show us more?”

Armin frowned, looking up from where he was flopped on his stomach. “Do you mean—?”

“You think she’ll show your parents?” Eren asked, voice gentle, a far cry from his earlier snarls.

She shrugged, prodding the carpet with her toes. “It’s a possibility, isn’t it?” she said. “And, earlier, during. . . the attack.” Eren’s expression shifted, closing off, and he pursed his lips.

“She showed my—well, *memory*, if that’s what you want to call it. Why would they do that, if they didn’t plan on showing the full thing?”

Armin glanced between the two silent siblings, nibbling at his lower lip, eyebrows drawn together. “Well,” he offered. “Maybe that was all it was? A memory? I mean,” he added, sitting up and crossing his legs, holding his palms out in a placating gesture. “We *did* skip almost three years in one episode. I doubt she’d show it again.”

Eren nodded. “It’s probably not important to the future, anyways,” he added.

Mikasa nodded. “You’re right.” She tossed the cushion to the end of the bed and lay down, head landing with a small *poff* on the other fluffy, down-filled pillows at the head. “I’m going to take a nap,” she announced.

“Nap?” Eren looked up, a comical expression of shock on his face. “You?”

“Mhm.” She closed her eyes. “The beds are comfortable,” she said. “Wake me up when we need to go back down.”

The boys muttered their agreement, and Mikasa heard the shuffling of bedsheets and the carpet as they stood up, examining the rest of the room in more detail. As she shifted into a more comfortable position, a sudden thought struck her.

We’re a story, she thought. *A story created by a man in another world. And, in this story, we’re the main characters. He’s the one who created us, wrote us into existence, made us who we are. So. . .* She cracked her eyelids open by a fraction of an inch, peering up at the ceiling (painted the same pale grey as the walls). *He chose our fates. Our pasts, presents, and future were all molded at the will of that man. So, why?* She clenched her fists, nails digging into the soft sheets. *Why did my parents have to die? So I’d meet Eren?* She pursed her lips. *No—I would’ve met him anyways*. She resisted the urge to scream and tear at her hair. *Why?* She grit her teeth, and, for a second, the room flashed before her eyes, turning into the dark, damp cabin in the woods, where her hands had first been stained by blood. *There’s something else*, she realized. *Something that had to happen. Something important to the future.* For a second, she considered sharing her theory with Eren and Armin, but something stopped her.

No. They can’t know.

She closed her eyes again, turning so that her back faced the rest of the room. *There* is *something else*, she thought. Gentle, padded footsteps approached her, muffled by the carpet, and she heard a rattling noise as the curtain was pulled around her bed, by gentle hands—gentler than Eren’s. Armin?

She opened her eyes, looking at the wall—tinged a deep shade of pink from the light hitting the curtain. *There’s something.*

I just have to figure out what.

A loud clanging noise rang through the apartment, startling Jean out of his nap with a yelp. He fumbled across the room, throwing the door of the room open. Across the hall, a skittish Moblit peeked out.

"Who the fuck?" Levi demanded, throwing open the door next to him, the windowpanes trembling in their frames as the door slammed into the wall (the poor XO all but jumped out of his skin as the door very nearly took his face off).

"Must be the TV!" Hange said, shoving their way out from behind Moblit.

The door next to Jean's opened by a crack and Krista peeked out. "Has it been ten minutes?" she asked.

"Well, it's either that, or someone found a gong," Ymir stated, shoving the door fully open. The tiny blonde yelped, stumbling forwards into the hall.

"Well, then." Erwin and Mike walked out behind Levi. "Let's go."

"What are you two doing here?" Jean demanded. "The sign on the door said the three of us were supposed to be in that room!"

"Hm?" Sasha looked up, cheeks bulging. "Oh, fhey, Jhun!" She swallowed and held up a bowl. "Look at this! It's cheese crackers!"

"What are cheese crackers?" Armin asked, frowning.

"I don't know!" Connie grinned, shoving his hand into the bowl. "But it's good!"

Omni sighed from where she sat on the armrest of her chair, rubbing her forehead. "Can you all just sit down?" she groaned.

"You said that these OVAs are going to be helping us get to know each other better," Erwin said, sitting down on the couch in front, Levi and Mike on either side of him. "So, what's the first one going to be about?" Hange flopped down at Levi's feet, dodging a light kick at their head.

The thin rectangle appeared in Omni's hand again, and she began flicking through options in a menu that'd popped up on screen. "Mainly moments from your lives before Trost," she said, not looking at him as she scrolled down a list.

"What's the first one?" Ymir asked, sinking down onto a bean bag next to Krista.

"Should be right here. . ." Omni muttered, clicking an episode, titled in English. "Oh," she glanced up, corner of her mouth twitching. "You'll see."

Wind whistled through the air as mist rolled through Trost. The fog shrouded the buildings, blanketing the buildings and wrapping around the spire of a church, the pointed posts of an iron fence pitch-black in the grey light. "*On that day, the boy remembered with fear*. . ." Ominous music began playing as heavy breaths were heard.

“What?” Eren sat up straight, eyes widening at the familiar words and tense tune. “I thought this was supposed to be a relaxing episode!”

“What’s going on?” Ymir demanded, whirling around to looking at Omni. The god didn’t even acknowledge the dark-haired girl’s question, thumbs flying across the screen of her small rectangle.

Jean cowered beneath a blanket, eyebrows drawn tightly together, teeth grit, panting as he clenched his jaw.

Jean let out a horrified gasp, grabbing his face. “Oh, *no*.” He groaned, covering his face.

“Uh. . .” Connie blinked at the screen. “Jean?”

“Dude,” Eren wrinkled her nose. “The hell are you doing?”

“*Please* say you’re not whacking your dong.” Ymir shuddered.

“Of course not!” Jean screeched, face burning red.

“Then what’re you doing under the covers?” Sasha asked. “Don’t tell me you’re hiding from a serial killer, or something.” She gasped. “Is that what this episode’s about? Jean, why didn’t you ever tell us about this?”

“It’s not a serial killer!” Jean bristled, now the colour of a ripe tomato. “It’s—ugh, you’ll see.”

A floorboard creaked as a woman in a red dress walked up the staircase, her legs throwing heavy shadows on the wall as weak, ashen sunlight filtering in through the window, every step accompanied by the heavy beat of a drum. “*That he was subject to their dominance*. . .”

“Seriously, what’s this about?” Ymir asked. “The narrator’s talking like he’s in the middle of a battle, but it’s literally just him jerking off under the—”

“I am *not* jerking off!” Jean’s voice cracked as he shrieked.

Levi tugged at Erwin’s elbow. “Do we *have* to watch this?” he asked. “I mean, how the hell is this supposed to help us with the future?”

“There could always be other reasons,” Erwin suggested quietly. “Like Omni said, we’re a story—” He still felt strange saying that: someone, a man in another world, had chosen his fate, written his past, all without him not even knowing. Every action, decision, and death on his hands had all been written for the enjoyment of people who didn’t even know he was *real*—in a sense, at least. The thought left a sour taste in his mouth, so he shoved it away, into the dark recesses of his mind.

Levi raised his eyebrows as Erwin faltered. The blond didn’t acknowledge it as he kept talking. “This episode could be important for story development.”

“Or,” Mike offered, glancing over at them. “It could just be something funny before we get to the darker stuff.”

“Or!” Hange tilted their head back. “Something important *does* happen!”

“Or,” Levi monotoned. “It’s a waste of time.”

A stick of charcoal wrapped in a white tissue, clenched between two deft, but, nevertheless deft, fingers, worked furiously against a sheet of paper on a wooden board.

"Jean!" Connie faux-gasped. "Are you *drawing?*"

Jean buried his face in his hands, shoulder curled forwards. Marco patted him awkwardly on the back as Ymir cackled openly.

A bead of sweat rolled down Jean's cheek as he all but glared down at the page. He let out a small gasp as a drop of sweat fell from the tip of his nose and landed on the smiling face of the dark-haired girl he'd skillfully depicted on the sheet.

"Are you drawing *Mikasa?*" Eren looked trapped between surprised and horrified.

"Sure looks like it," Armin muttered.

"It's *not!*" Jean yelled. "I mean, no offense—" he blabbered. "I just—it's—I didn't know you at this time!" Mikasa nodded wordlessly, wrapping a tassel around her finger, looking awkwardly down at the floor.

"Ah," Ymir nodded sagely. "So she was always your type, huh?" Mikasa's ears flushed red.

"No!" Jean screeched. "I mean—yes! I mean—!"

"Like I said," Levi grumbled. "Waste of time."

"I dunno," Mike was grinning as he watched the exchange. "I've gotta say, this is pretty entertaining."

He reached forwards, quickly wiping it away, the nose smudging as he brushed his hand over it. He gasped, eyes going wide in horror. "Shit. . ." he muttered, scrubbing at the spot with an eraser and blowing the shavings away. "*And recalled with shame that the walls around him were a cage*."

"How?" Eren demanded. "You're literally just drawing in bed!"

Jean's face burned as he glared at the screen, arms crossed, not replying.

The camera zoomed out, showing Jean lying on his bed, head and body covered with his blanket as he worked on the drawing, open books and a pair of boots scattered on the ground, the only light being the daylight seeping in through the window.

"That is *not* a cage," Ymir said. "That's a perfectly decent room in a perfectly decent house!" Jean's face burnt redder, and he stared ahead sullenly, not meeting anyone's eyes.

Jean's eyes went wide with shock as the floor right outside his room creaked, and, eyes flashing with electric light, whirled around. The door was thrown open, banging into the bookshelf against the wall as Jean's mother strode in, scowling, a pan clenched in her left hand. Jean shouted, grabbing the blanket and throwing it over himself.

"Holy Rose, you're just drawing a picture," Oluo snorted. "Not slapping your goat!"

"How many times do I have to call you?!" Mrs. Kirschtein demanded furiously. "It's lunchtime!"

"Oh, I remember her," Mikasa said. "She was nice."

“Knock first, you old hag!” Jean yelled, lifting the sheet from his head and turning to glare at her. “What’d you have to bring that in here for?!” he snarled, face red as he gestured at the omelette in the pan.

Hange gasped. “How rude!”

“You should be nicer to your mother,” Krista said. A part of her resented Jean for being able to yell at his mother and not have her turn her back on him. For a moment, she wondered what it would be like to have her mother care about her enough to come up to her room and call her down for lunch—to care enough to argue with her about it, even.

Mrs. Kirschtein tossed the omelette around, flipping it in the pan. “Even when I yell, you refuse to come down,” she sighed, closing her eyes.

A vein twitched in Jean’s forehead as he turned, eyes wide as dinner plates, eyebrows furrowed in a furious glare. “Just get out, you withered old witch!” he screeched, clenching the sketch in his hands as he grabbed her by the shoulder and shoved her out, slamming the door after her. Mrs. Kirschtein’s furious muttering could still be heard as the impact shook the house and Jean growled, standing barefoot in the middle of the room.

“Ungrateful brat,” Levi snarled. Jean withered. “Spoiled little shit,” he bit out.

“She just wants to help you,” Ymir snapped. “Can’t you just appreciate it?”

“Sure, she went into your room, but you didn’t have to be such a massive dick about it,” Eren growled.

He took the edges of the paper gingerly and held it open, looking at the ruined face. The image shook as he clenched the sheet tightly and tore it in half, knuckles white. “Goddamn that stupid crone!” he screamed, tearing the drawing into countless tiny pieces and hurling them through the air, the shredded paper fluttering the floor around him.

“And now you throw a temper tantrum.” Levi rolled his eyes. “I’d call you a son of a bitch, but I’d prefer not to drag your mother into this.”

He marched across the room, slamming his hands onto the windowsill, glaring out at the rooftops. *I will join the Military Police and achieve my goal!* he thought, eyes wide, brows drawn tightly together in anger. *My goal of securing an easy, danger-free life behind the innermost Wall. . .* Furious tears of injustice pricked the corners of his eyes. *I* will *achieve that!*

“Do you live over a shop?” Marco asked.

Jean nodded, face still red with embarrassment. “My dad’s a merchant.”

“Spoiled, dickish brat,” Ymir muttered. Krista glanced at her, but couldn’t bring herself to defend Jean.

The familiar image of the bloody cadets in the grey-and-red field appeared. “*Our names won’t be remembered if we die like trampled flowers*.” However, there was one major

difference: rather than Eren standing at the front, Jean was standing in front of him, blocking him from view of the camera.

"Why is Jean in front?" Eren demanded.

"Maybe 'cause this episode's centred around him," Moblit suggested.

"Seriously?" Eren scowled. "All we've seen is him being an asshole, so far."

"Oh, like you've been better?" Jean shot back. "Come on, like you've never yelled at—" he clamped his jaw shut as Eren clenched his fists, glaring at him.

"Come on," Eren hissed. "Finish that sentence. I *dare* you."

Jean ground his teeth together. "You're a dick," he snarled.

"*I*—" Eren leapt to his feet, eyes wild.

"Shut up," Levi growled. Jean 'tsk'-ed, turning back to glare at the TV, and Mikasa grabbed the back of Eren's jacket, forcing him back into his seat. "You can settle this pissing contest later," Levi snarled. "But, for now, I'd just like to get through this teenage bullshit so we can get back to the important part."

"*I refuse to be forgotten, written off as less than worthless*." Jean turned to look at Mikasa, who continued staring at the ground.

"Perv," Connie whispered, barely loud enough for Sasha and Jean to hear him, the air still heavy with the tension of Jean and Eren's near-fight. Jean elbowed him harshly in the ribs and Sasha bit her lip to supress a giggle.

"*You no longer live as cattle. Will you rise and join the battle*?" The cadets saluted. Once again, Jean was standing at the centre of the screen, Eren standing a few rows back, next to Marco.

"Wasn't Jean standing behind Eren in the original opening?" Petra furrowed her brow.

"Must be the whole Jean-centric thing again," Eld muttered back. "The opening's just really hammering in the fact that we're supposed to be paying attention to him."

"*There are beings that live off fears, and their words are like knives as they play with our lives.*" The sketchy drawings flashed on screen again, this time all featuring Jean: his eyes wide, grinning as he mocked Eren's failure on the ODM aptitude test, and his head tilted back ridiculously, mouth open, in the mess hall.

"What are you doing?" Moblit asked.

"Well, the first one's Jean making fun of Eren for failing the aptitude test," Armin said.

"What about the second?" Gunther asked.

"I *think* that's from one of Jean and Eren's arguments?" Sasha furrowed her brow. "Uh. . . 'What is it, Eren?', I think it was?"

Jean hovered in the air next to Eren, once again blocking most of him from the camera. He grit his teeth and yelled as the screen flashed to black. "*They'll try to control you, as if they own you. Will you let them steal your freedom?*"

"You weren't even there!" Eren protested.

"Neither were you!" Jean snapped, temper flaring up again. "It's just a dumbass opening!"

"Shut up!" Ymir yelled.

Jean pointed, shouting, as Eren ran along a roof, shooting into the air and attacking a blonde Titan, blades slicing out the nape as the Titan jerked, falling forwards. "*So, make yourself the one, Jäger!*" He pumped his fist, grinning.

"They're presenting it like Jean was ordering me to attack the giant sweatshow or something," Eren grumbled.

Eren ran across the Wall, face contorted in fury, swords drawn, and leapt off the side. Jean flew over him as he leapt off the Wall, and the screen froze as he grinned down, almost completely covering them. "*Your crimson arrow rips through the twilight. This is the moment for war!*"

"Dude!" Eren yelled. Armin snorted into his hand. "Armin!" he protested. "Oi, Horseface, were you even *on* the Wall?"

Jean walked down the street, eyes set and determined. "*Spurred on by his dream*," the narrator said as the end of the opening played into the next scene. "*The boy left home and survived the grueling military training.*" Mrs. Kirscthein stood next to Mr. Kirschtein, a hand clutching her chest as she watched Jean walk down the street, a bag slung over his shoulder, then wiped away a small tear.

"Hey, Jean," Ymir teased. "Looks like you got the horse genes from your dad. I mean," she sneered as she gestured at the screen. "Look at that long-ass face!"

Jean bristled. "Shut it, beanpole!" he snarled.

Images of Jean during the training camp were shown: him and Eren sparring; him grabbing Eren by the shirt and raising a fist as they screamed at each other in the mess hall; Eren kicking Jean over as the other cadets watched on in shock.

"That's a cool move!" Petra said. "Where'd you learn it? Doesn't look like anything you'd learn from cadets."

"Oh, it's not mine," Eren said. "Annie taught me that, actually."

All eyes swivelled to the blonde, who looked mildly surprised to be the centre of attention. "Where'd you learn that?" Eld asked.

"Oh—" Annie blinked. "My father taught me."

Levi frowned. He'd seen similar moves used before—Underground. *Where'd he learn that? And why'd he think she need it?*

"*Humiliation after humiliation only served to fuel his fire*." Jean watched Mikasa walk by for the first time before the image changed, showing his horrified and dejected expression as she brushed by him and ran after Eren.

"Looks like humiliation and embarrassment could be seen as themes for this episode," Moblit said. "No offense!" he added as Jean scowled.

"*And, two years later, the boy returned*. . ." Shadis rode at the head of a group of trainers and cadets as they walked down a hill. Jean walked behind Mikasa, staring ahead with determination. "*To the cage he'd once escaped from*." The camera moved into the air as the opening came to its end, rays of sunlight streaming down onto the Walls of Trost.

"Could you stop referring to it as a cage?" Ymir scowled. "It's a perfectly nice house with a perfectly nice family in a perfectly nice district."

"Yeah, well," Jean snapped. "Eren was rich, and spent all his time screeching about how the Walls sucked."

"Fair point," Armin said. "Still, you really should be nicer to your mother."

"I know," Jean muttered. "I got better, okay?"

Civillians crowded around a poster depicting an armoured man with a shield and a spear facing off against a boar nearly three times his size.

Rounds of gasps suddenly echoed through the recruits. "Oh!" Sasha cried. "It's *this!*"

"What?" Hange looked around at them. "What is it? What's gonna happen?"

"No wonder the rest of the episode focused on Jean so much!" Armin said.

"Seriously," Gunther said. "What's gonna happen?"

"You'll see!" Connie said.

"Apparently, it's appeared again," a man said, clutching his hat to his chest as a teenage couple clutched each other's hands behind him. "Someone has to kill it."

"Shit," Mike muttered. "That thing's a Titan of a pig." Sasha and Connie began giggling, and the mustachioed Squad Leader raised his eyebrows. "Was it something I said?"

"Nothing!" Sasha said, still grinning and shaking her head around. "No, it's fine!"

"We can't go out hunting with this monster around," another man lamented.

"This is awesome!" Connie said as the cadets walked by, knapsacks and bedrolls strapped to their backs. "This is the first time I've been in one of the Walled Cities!"

"Really?" Krista asked. "Ever?"

Connie shrugged. "We grow most of our own stuff, and merchants come by with what we can't get ourselves," he explained. "And the recruiter came to our village, so I didn't have to go to any major cities to enlist."

Marco nodded. "It was the same for me," he said. "But we were closer, so we were able to go over every so often."

Sasha smiled, nodding as she followed him. "There'll be lots of tasty food to eat!"

A few people laughed. "One-track mind," Petra chuckled, shaking her head.

Jean, Marco, and Armin walked behind them. "Hey, you lot," Jean said with a small smirk.

“Huh?” the others turned to look at him.

“If you join the Garrison, you can stay here as long as you like,” Jean said, grinning cockily. “I’ll come visit and see how you’re doing when I’m in the Military Police.” He threw his head back and began laughing, while Connie and Sasha regarded him with bored familiarity.

Jean winced at the sight of himself on screen. “Was I really like—”

“*Yes*,” Sasha said.

“You were a pompous jerk,” Annie said, “Who fancied himself a womanizer.”

“I wasn’t *that*—”

“You really were,” Annie said apathetically.

“Hey. . .” Armin said as Jean finished his round of cackling. “Where exactly is your house, Jean?” he asked.

“Does it matter?” Jean scowled.

“Oh, boy,” Ymir sighed, propping her chin on top of Krista’s head. “Here we go.”

“Aren’t you going to pop home?” Marco asked. “Thomas said he was planning to.” Jean glanced over his shoulder at the dark-haired boy with a scowl.

“Your mom will be happy to see you!” Armin added as Jean squeezed his eyes shut, shoulders shaking with the tension of clenching his fists.

“Pigheadedness coming in three, two. . .” Sasha said. Jean glared at her, and she shrugged.

“Shut it, you two!” Jean roared, whirling around to glare at them. “Just drop it!”

“Seriously, what do you have against seeing your mom?” Hange asked. “Was it just teenage angst, or were you seriously that bratty?”

Jean shrivelled. “Uh. . .” he toed at the carpet. “I think it was probably a mix of both, honestly.”

Oluo rolled his eyes. “*Now* he admits it,” he scoffed. “Honestly, kids these—”

“You’re not much better,” Petra sighed, handing him a napkin as his teeth closed over his tongue.

“Uh—” the others stared at him as an awkward silence fell, broken only by the chatter of the people around them and their boots on the street.

“Screaming at your mom was bad enough,” Eld said. “But, seriously, they’re your friends. And, plus, it’s not like they knew it was a touchy subject.”

“*Listen closely, you pigs!*” Shadis stepped forwards, facing the recruits as they lined up in front of him at the camp. “Training for the anticipated attack on Trost will take place shortly.” The cadets stood in parade rest, looking up at him as he spoke. “The commanding officer of the Southern Region, Commander Pixis, will also be in attendance.”

Sasha sighed. “I never thought we’d actually *need* the training,” she said.

"I still wish we didn't," Connie muttered.

So do I, Erwin thought. *Although, if the Battle had never happened*. . . he glanced at Eren. *We'd never had known about Eren's ability.*

Jean glanced at Marco, who shrugged helplessly. "I doubt it could have helped anyways," he said

"I guess so," Jean said.

Back in the present, the recruits stood on the red-tiled rooves of Trost. "*Show him how you farmyard pigs*. . ." Wood creaked as massive Titan silhouetted were wheeled out. "*Have transformed into soldiers over the last two years!*" Annie, Jean, and Armin stood on a rooftop, knees bent, hands hovering over their swords.

A few of the veterans shuffled forwards, curious to see how things would turn out. They hadn't seen any of them fight yet—not in detail, anyways.

Just how good is this year's top ten? Mike wondered. He was aware that this was a year ago, but he was still interested.

"Yes, sir!" Jean stared ahead, eyes narrowed with determination.

The peals of the swinging bell rang through the town, and, with a resounding yell, the recruits surged forwards, pulling out their swords as they leapt from the rooftops, soaring over the streets and buildings.

"Looks like you guys've got the hang of ODM in cities," Hange said.

"Evacuate calmly and obey the instructions give to you!" a Garrison soldier on the ground shouted as civilians rushed past him, his partner standing behind him, waving her hand and beckoning the Trostians forwards. Jean's mother paused and turned back, looking up at the sky. "Only take the essentials with you!" Another woman stopped next to her and grabbed her hand, pulling her away.

Was she looking for me? Jean wondered. He scowled, shaking his head. *Of course she was. She's a great mother*. He felt a pang of guilt. *And I was such a shit about it*.

"Jean!" Armin called. "Are you sure we're allowed to push up this far?" he asked as he and Annie followed Jean, running down a roof. "Our objective is to deal with the Titans that make it through the front line—"

"You ditched your position?" Petra asked, aghast. "Why would you—"

"Jean was being an idiot," Annie said.

"Stop being so inflexible!" Jean shouted. "We're soldiers, which means we kill Titans!" The three of them leapt off the roof, arms held out, silhouetted in the cerulean sky.

"Says the guy dead-set on getting into the MPs," Eren said, rolling his eyes.

"He was just trying to bullshit his way out of things," Ymir snorted.

“All you want to do is score more brownie points,” Annie stated bluntly, hair and jacket whipped around by the air, before firing a cable and shooting away, a puff of gas erupting behind her.

“Wow,” Sasha laughed. “Annie sure doesn’t sugarcoat things!”

“You say that like you haven’t known her for three years,” Connie snorted. Annie glanced away as the two turned to look at her.

Petra stood up, leaning forwards to tap Levi on the shoulder. “She’s kind of like you, Captain,” she said. Levi rolled his eyes, nudging her away. Mike snorted.

“Commander.” Anka knelt on the Wall, holding a spyglass up to her eye as she observed the proceedings. “The 21st Squad have left their post.”

“*Ooh*. . .” Eld hissed. “You guys are in trouble, now!”

A low rumbling noise sounded through the air and she lowered the glass, looking up. “Commander?”

Eld blinked. “Huh?”

“What was that?” Moblit asked.

“It’s *Pixis*.” Gunther rolled his eyes. “What do you *think* it is?”

The camera panned up, showing Pixis standing on the Wall next to her, a ceremonial ribbon slung across his body, arms crossed over his chest as he snored, cheeks flushed a drunken pink as he dozed, barely a foot away from a fifty-metre plummet to the ground.

“Sweet Sina,” Jean muttered. “He’s sleeping on the edge of the Wall. Standing up!”

“Sometimes, I think he’d have fared better in the Corps,” Mike said. “I mean, he’s nutty enough.”

“Nah,” Hange shook their head. “An army of drunkards should be led by the biggest drunkard of them all.”

“Fair,” Eld nodded.

Anka stood up, snapping the eyeglass shut and closing her eyes. She moved forwards, putting her face right next to his ear. “Commander!” she shouted.

“I feel so bad for her,” Ymir chuckled, shaking her head. “She does this often, doesn’t she?”

Hange chuckled. “She’s with him twenty-four/seven,” they said. “She does everything for him.” They shook their head. “Bet you guys are glad you don’t work for him, do you?”

“Doesn’t XO Berner basically have the same job?” Mikasa asked.

Pixis startled awake with a sleepy grunt, looking around, dazed and confused. “Is it already time to eat?” he asked.

The recruits broke out into giggles. “Can’t you just tell us what’s gonna happen?” Eld asked.

“Nope!” Sasha said cheerfully.

“You only had lunch a little while ago,” Anka sighed, shoulders slumping. “Hey—!” She reached forwards, snatching a flask out of Pixis’s hands as he yanked it out of his pocket. Gustav glanced up from his clipboard.

“How has he *not* fallen from any of the Walls yet?” Jean asked, shaking his head. “I mean—come on. He’s what, a hundred? Don’t tell me he hasn’t had a near-death experience at least *once*.”

“Oh, he probably has,” Hange said airily. “But he’s wearing ODM, so he should be fine.”

“He’s drunk as a pig left in a vineyard,” Eren said. “Honestly, I’m surprised he’s still standing.”

Anka walked over to the other soldier, frowning. “He should take this more seriously,” she said as Gustav chuckled.

“Well,” Gustav offered. “For him, this counts as downtime.” As they spoke, Pixis reached into his jacket and pulled out another flask, unscrewing it and taking a large gulp. “Let him be.”

“Of course he has another one!” Ymir laughed.

Erwin chuckled. “Master strategist, he is, he probably has another backup stored somewhere.”

“He has a lot of medals,” Krista commented. “How long has he been serving?”

Mike shrugged. “Dunno. All I know’s that he was already an officer when Erwin and I were in diapers.”

“Oh, wow,” Connie muttered. “He’s *old*.”

The old man let out a satisfied sigh and looked up, cheeks pink, a dopey grin half-hidden by his mustache. “I wonder what we’re having for dinner. . .”

Sasha and Jean glanced at each other, smirking. Connie chuckled, and Reiner crossed his arms with a small smile. Annie glanced at him with a frown. “What?” he said. “Come on, don’t tell me you’re not excited to see this again.”

She frowned. “Reiner,” she said. “Are you—”

“What?” He furrowed his brows. “Annie? What’s up?”

She shook her head, ignoring the rolling feeling in her stomach turning away. “Never mind.” She clenched her fists, nails digging into her palms, at her sides.

Gas spurted in a steady stream from Jean’s mechanism as he shot through the air, hair flying this way and that, Annie and Armin following close behind him. His eyes widened and he made a triumphant noise as he spotted a Titan silhouette looming out of an alleyway. *There’s one*. . . “He’s mine!” he shouted, firing a cable towards the building. “Wha—” A dark blur flashed by him as Mikasa shot forwards, tearing out the fake Titan’s nape with a swift slash of her blades.

“Beaten to the punch!” Gunther said.

"He wasn't even supposed to be there," Eren said, rolling his eyes.

Jean staring as she flew away, then let out a conceited chuckle, smirking. *As amazing as always*. . . he thought, watching her movements. *You're the only one who can outmaneuver me.*

"Her, and five other people," Eren smirked, crossing his arms.

"Oh, shut it, Titan Breath," Jean snapped. "You only beat me by a bit!"

"Yeah?" he raised an eyebrow. "Still beat you."

"Well. . . you're a Titan!" Jean said. "It doesn't count!"

"Annie, Reiner, and Bertolt are ranked above him," Armin said. Two of the three tensed, and Reiner raised his eyebrow.

"Yeah!" Eren raised his chin, grinning. "Your argument is invalid!"

"*You're* invalid!"

Jean turned, expression stern once more. "Guys!" he called. "This way!"

The three of them flew over an alley, heading towards three silhouettes. *I'll get one this time!* Jean swore.

"No you won't!" Connie chirped.

"As always, thank you, Jean!" Jean looked up and let out a furious, gargling, splutter as Connie zipped by overhead, sneering down at them. "He's mine!" Jean zoomed by beneath the Titan's shoulder, the false nape falling to the ground, missing him by a hair.

Erwin raised his eyebrow at the surprising speed. *Judging by his goofy attitude, I'd have assumed he would be lax in the air, too. Though, I suppose, he* was *part of the top ten for a reason*.

"Bastard!" Jean yelled, turning in midair and shooting another cable forwards, torso snapping back from the force of his sudden turn. "You've gotta be kidding me!" he roared, expression wild as he charged after Connie.

"That's not even your area!" Connie said. "What're you getting all pissed about? You're the one stealing *our* kills!"

Two flashes of light slashed across the dark screen, and Jean looked behind him, eyes widening in furious shock. Reiner landed on a nearby rooftop, blades hanging casually by his thighs. "Sorry, Jean," he called.

"Oh, yeah," Jean rolled his eyes. "Look at me, with my swords and huge muscles, just casually taking out fake Titans—" he ducked, laughing, as Reiner tossed an apple at him playfully. Bertolt watched both of them carefully.

"Yahoo!" Sasha cheered, pumping her swords into the air from where she stood on the carved-out nape of the other Titan. "Yahoo!"

"You've gotten better!" Connie called to her as Jean landed on the street below, staring up at them, teeth clenched, eyes wild, pupils contracted with blinding rage.

“I’ve always been this good!” Sasha protested as Jean’s blades shook, knuckles white as snow as he gripped his handles.

“Come on, Jean, you’ve gotta chill!” Connie grinned.

“You took my kill!” Jean protested.

“You were in *our* zone!” Sasha countered.

“But you’re still no match for me!” Connie joked. Jean grit his teeth with a furious hiss.

A young woman smiled, talking to an old man at a vegetable stand as he handed her a carrot. She placed it into the basket she clutched to her chest, next to a loaf of bread, as a man with a bag slung over his shoulder walked past. “That was playing dirty, you thieving bastards!” The incensed screech echoed through the street, and Connie looked up from his potato, frowning.

“Look who’s talking about thieving!” Sasha sniffed. “Hypocrite!”

“Huh?” he cocked an eyebrow.

“I spotted them first!” Jen’s fists were clenched as he stood in front of the other two recruits, Annie, Reiner, and Armin watching from a distance away.

“Seriously, dude, calm down,” Mike said.

Levi groaned, pressing the heels of his hands into his eyes. “Can we *please* skip this?”

Sasha swallowed her bulging mouthful of the steamed spud. “Playing dirty?” she raised her eyebrows, smirking. “Jean, you sure come out with some baloney. You think there’s an etiquette when it comes to hunting?” She took a bite out of the potato clenched in her right hand.

“Ah!” Hange nodded sagely. “Hunter logic. Can’t argue with that.”

Jean scowled down at her. “Don’t lay some hunter logic on me, Potato Girl,” he snapped.

Ymir burst out laughing at the half-startled, half-amused look on Hange’s face.

“Potato Girl?!” Sasha squawked, the horrified noise drawing Connie and Reiner’s attention. “I thought everyone had forgotten about that. . .” she grumbled as she turned to the side, scowling.

“Oh, please,” Ymir snickered. “We’re *never* letting you live that down!” Sasha stuck her tongue out at her. “Oh, very mature.”

“Don’t call me names!” She leapt to her feet, fists clenched.

“Yeah!” Connie defended, jumping up. “Apologize to her!”

“For starters,” Reiner interrupted as Jean reared back, clenching his own fists. “That whole area was in our zone.”

“Reiner, ever the voice of reason,” Eren said.

Erwin nodded. “It’s good that he stopped them,” he said. “It would’ve been an ugly mark on their records if they got into a fight during a training exercise.”

“Yeah!” Connie leered. “Exactly!” He frowned, furrowing his brows. “You know, you’re acting kinda weird today.” He sneered, leaning forwards, speaking in a simpering tone. “Are you itching to go see Mommy?” He giggled.

“Spot-on!” Sasha said. Jean smacked her on top of the head. “Hey!”

“Is that it?” Sasha asked, eyes wide with surprise.

“As if!” Jean screamed, looming over her, shoving his face into her’s. His fist flew through the air and Sasha’s eyes blazed red as she ducked.

“Woah!” Hange said.

“That was. . .” Moblit said. “Sudden.”

“The same thing happened when Krista brought her food,” Ymir said. “Maybe it’s just exaggerated for effect.”

“That’s probably it,” Mike agreed, nodding.

“*Yargh!*” Connie and Sasha hissed together, Sasha throwing her arms to either side of her head one leg curled up in front of her, while Connie adopted a praying mantis pose, legs twisted in a sideways lunge, arms curled in front of him, a knife clenched between two teeth.

“*What?!*” Hange fell backwards, head smacking into Erwin’s knee as they cackled, clutching their stomach.

“Where did you get a knife, Connie?” Eren snorted. “And why are you holding it in your *teeth?*”

“My hands were busy!” Connie protested.

“Doing *what?*” Ymir rolled her eyes.

“What kind of moves are *those?*” Mike asked, looking trapped between confusion and being impressed.

“The best!” Sasha said, crossing her arms defiantly.

“Oh, no doubt,” Ymir snorted.

“Stop it, you two,” Reiner stepped forwards, holding out a hand. In the background, Armin waved his hands frantically, cutting off Annie as he pointed at the commotion. “You too, Jean,” Reiner added, frowning at the younger boy. “You won’t make the Military Police like this.”

“And, once again, Reiner saves the day,” Eren said. “Jeez, you guys are causing a lot of trouble.”

“Says you!” Sasha said.

“Yeah,” Jean said. “Just ‘cause this episode isn’t focusing on you, doesn’t mean you’re less of a dumbass.”

Jean tsked, slowly lowering his fist. “When we finish up our training tomorrow,” Jean declared. “We’ll see who can take out more targets!” The other two watched him, eyes narrowed, one of Sasha’s hands still held up in a fighting stance.

“Is that what the episode’s gonna be about?” Hange wondered. “Them fighting for who gets the more Titans?”

Connie snickered, and Jean coughed, grinning into his fist.

“Oh, come on,” Gunther said, rolling his eyes. “Can’t you just tell us?”

“No way!” Connie said.

“It *is* more interesting if you find out this way,” Armin said, smiling.

“Interesting!” The cadets started, looking to the side.

Eld chuckled. “Sounds like he thinks so, too,” he told Armin.

The other recruits down the street gasped, spines snapping straight, fists landing over their hearts as Pixis walked down the street towards the trio, hands behind his back. Jean stiffened, snapping into a textbook salute, and the other two glanced at him before standing straight as well.

“Look at Connie trying to look all serious,” Sasha giggled. Connie slugged her in the side, and she slapped his shoulder.

Pixis stopped in front of them, cheeks still a hazy red. “Commander Pixis.”

“I’ll adjudicate,” the Commander said, smiling.

“Really?” Mike raised his eyebrows. “I didn’t peg the old guy as a fan of competitions.”

“He’s drunk, remember?” Hange said.

“He’s *always* drunk.”

A few confused whispers echoed through the alley. “Your fighting spirit is certainly commendable!” the old man congratulated. “However,” he continued. “Using a training exercise to win an argument is unacceptable.” The recruits watched him nervously, and Jean’s shoulders tensed.

“Are your eyes closed, Annie?” Armin asked.

“I don’t know,” Annie muttered. “Does it matter?”

“You really shouldn’t be disrespectful to a superior officer,” Erwin said.

She shrugged. “He’s drunk. I doubt he even noticed.” *And, besides, it’s not disrespect*.

Pixis paused to take a deep drink from his flask. He sighed, smacking his lips. “Fight by cooking,” he ordered.

The veterans’ jaws dropped. “Pardon?” Hange squawked.

Connie, Sasha, and Jean leaned forwards. “Pardon?” the ash-haired boy said weakly.

“Seriously?” Hange threw their hands in the air.

“*Cooking?*” Mike spluttered. “He wants you to have a *food* war?”

“How does that even work?” Eld frowned. “Is it just which dish he think tastes better? Or, I dunno, something else?”

Pixis’s mouth opened wide, the movement of his jaw followed by the camera. “Fight by cooking!” he said, louder.

“Oh, god,” Moblit said. “He’s serious, isn’t he?”

“Oh, he’s serious,” Jean said.

Jean’s fists dropped from his chest and his arms dangled limply at his side as he stared. “Huh?”

“Holy hell,” Levi blinked. “How drunk does he have to be for this to happen?”

The camera panned to the other side of Pixis, where Sasha stood, hands clasped in front of her, eyes wide and sparkling. “Cooking?” she asked, voice high and girlish with delight.

“Oh, wow,” Marco blinked. “That was a *huge* mood switch.”

“Are you good at cooking, Sasha?” Mike asked.

“Oh, yeah,” Connie grinned. “She’s great.”

“That’s right,” Pixis said, lifting his chin. “Cooking.” The camera swept dramatically as he threw his arms out, eyes dark with ceremony. “A cook-off!”

“Calling it now!” Hange declared. “Sasha wins!” They looked around. “Am I right? Or am I right?”

Connie began laughing, and Reiner shook his head. “You’ll just have to watch,” he said, grinning.

The other recruits watched, eyes wide, postures tense. “A cook-off?!” a boy asked.

“Why a cook-off?” another asked.

“Why cooking of all things?” Behind Pixis, Bertolt stared at them.

“‘Cause he’s drunk and hungry,” Mike said.

“Honestly, those are pretty good reasons,” Eren said.

Gustav stared to the side, determinedly not meeting Anka’s gaze. “I should’ve confiscated that hip flask sooner, he grumbled. Anka nodded stiffly, glaring at a wall.

“She really should have,” Jean sighed. “Would’ve saved us a lot of trouble.”

“Yes,” Sasha said. “But, if the cook-off hadn’t happened, you wouldn’t have gone too see your mom.”

“Wait, wait, wait!” Hange chopped their hand through the air. “Hold up, I’m confused! Jean goes to see his mom ‘cause of the cook-off?”

“You’ll see!” Connie said.

“I’m really starting to hate that phrase,” Mike sighed.

“I—” Jean blinked. “I don’t mean to be rude, Commander Pixis,” he spluttered. “But we’re soldiers. Cooking isn’t in our remit—” He started, jolting back as a potato was shoved into his face.

“And you wonder why we call you Potato Girl,” Ymir said, rolling her eyes. Sasha shrugged.

“Jean!” Sasha clenched the tater tightly, eyes locked fiercely with his. “How much do you even know about cooking?”

“Exactly!” Connie cried, sliding into frame, one fist held in the air. “I bet your mom always cooked for you at home!”

“She did,” Jean smiled. Eren tugged at his sleeve, looking down. Mikasa nudged him with her shoulder.

“Hey,” she said. “Aren’t you just glad that it’s not about you, this time?”

He chuckled. “I guess.”

“Jean, my boy,” Sasha said seriously, lowering the potato as Connie held both fists at his sides, sneering at Jean. “I will teach you the true art of cooking.”

“Why are you standing like you’re about to start a race?” Moblit asked Connie.

“It’s my ready position!”

Sasha brought the potato up to her mouth, taking a massive bite out of it. The sound echoed as the other recruits stared, impossibly tense. Sasha chewed, gaze still fixed with Jean’s, crumbs all over the lower half of her face, brow furrowed tightly.

Levi shuddered. “Can you *not* eat something without getting it all over your face?” he asked.

“Maybe that’s why you’re always so hungry,” Jean joked. “‘Cause you only end up eating some of it—the rest of it gets wiped off!”

“Rude!” Sasha yelled, smacking him with a cushion as the others laughed.

Jean clenched his fists, arms shaking. “Fine!” he agreed. “Let’s do this!” Dramatic music began playing as he held up his fists, a Cheshire grin stretching across his face. “Cooking, cleaning. . . Throw what you like at me.”

Levi raised his eyebrows. “Cleaning competition doesn’t sound terrible,” he commented.

Petra shuddered. “Oh, god, please, no.”

“No offense, Captain,” Eld said. “But no.”

Hange shook their head, patting his knee with their notebook. “Gotta say, Levi,” they said. “Your hobbies sure are something. . . and, by something, I mean nothing.”

Levi grabbed the notebook and smacked them on the head.

He swung his arm dramatically in front of him before throwing it to the side. “If I win,” he said, sticking his thumb into his chest. “You must stay outta my way forever,” he pointed at her, face shadowed in the sun, eyes glinting, “Potato Girl!”

“She and Jean still hang out!” Hange said, rubbing the top of their head. “So that means that Sasha won, right?”

“Just keep watching!”

Sasha continued chewing, glaring darkly at him. “Good,” Pixis said. “The battle will take place tonight,” the aged officer decreed. “Both of you will cook and serve a main course for dinner.” He stared ahead, wrinkles exaggerated prominently as he screwed up his entire face. “Bring you best dish to the table!”

Cheers and roars echoed down the street as recruits jumped up and down, pumping their fists into the air and hugging each other.

"Oh, my god." Mike recoiled in horror. "What's up with their faces?"

"First Daz, and now this?" Eld looked extremely uncomfortable.

"They look like characters out of children's picture books," Hange said. "Or those weird murals you see in alleyways."

"A cooking duel between Sasha and Jean!" a nasally voice called out.

"This'll be worth watching!" a boy declared as the cadets flooded in from all sides.

"Annie sure doesn't look like she wants to be there, huh?" Eren said.

"Annie doesn't look like she wants to be wherever we are most of the time," Jean said.

"Annie is also right here," Annie snapped. A few giggles broke out.

"I won't be able to sleep tonight!" A gaggle of boys stood to the side, chattering excitedly.

"We won't let you sleep, anyway!" his friend said as they pumped their fists.

"So you guys have all day to prepare for the meal, and then you do the actual cooking at night?" Mike said. "It doesn't sound too hard."

"Yeah, well," Reiner shrugged. "They both really wanted to win. So, naturally, they went all-out."

"How?" Petra asked.

"You'll see," Reiner said, chuckling when protests arose from the older soldiers.

Eren and Mikasa stood to the side, Eren carrying a basket of bread, Mikasa, a crate of scrolls and metal tubes. They watched on, Mikasa looking curious, Eren, befuddled. "What's going on?" the brunet asked.

"There you guys are!" Hange said.

"It looks like," Erwin said, "Jean's the main character in this episode. Sasha's the antagonist, and the others are all background characters, more or less. Is that right?"

Ymir shrugged. "Guess it all depends on how the episode shows it," she said.

"No idea," Mikasa muttered.

A gong rang out as a drawing of Sasha and Levi appeared on screen.

Around the room, jaws dropped. Suddenly, Hange began laughing, falling on their front and banging the carpeted floor.

"What in *hell's name*—" Levi stared at the screen, mouth hanging open.

Sasha stood to the side, wiping down a plate, a small line of drool on the corner of her mouth, as Levi, flipped an omelette in a pan over a fire, dressed in full chef regalia: a red kerchief was looped around his neck, apron tied around his waist neatly with a bow, and his sleeves were rolled up. A hat was perched on top of his head as he regarded the food with

evident boredom, oblivious to Sasha's obvious hunger. Lines of Japanese and English were written on either side of them.

"That—!" Mike snorted. "Well, that sure isn't the type of episode break we're used to."

"What *is* that?" Levi demanded. "And what the hell am I wearing?"

"That's the type of outfit chefs wear on the Homepage," Omni said, glancing up from her small screen. "Since this is an OVA, there aren't normal episode breaks."

"Not normal is right," Gunther nodded.

"But what do the words mean?" Oluo asked.

"Oh, right. . ." The thin rectangle appeared, once again, in Omni's hand, and she opened up another menu. "These are called 'subtitles'," she said. "They translate the words on screen to your language."

Lines of familiar, blocky letters appeared at the bottom of the screen, translating the phrases on top:

***The secret of cooking? Hmph. Carefully selecting your ingredients so you don't regret using them, I guess*.**

"Wow," Hange snorted. "Very helpful."

"I know," Levi said. They stuck their tongue out at him, and he flipped them off.

The camera flew over a grassy plain, spotted with trees, as a guitar riff rang out. Three horses galloped over the rolling hills, kicking up clouds of dust behind them. "All right!" Jean declared as a drum beat joined the guitar. "It's in sight!"

"Are you working in a team?" Mike asked. "I thought it was just supposed to be Braus and Kirschtein duking it out."

"The Commander said that a bigger team means more, better food," Armin said.

"So, basically, he was just hungry," Gunther said.

"Why are we hunting?" Annie grumbled, a rifle slung over her shoulder.

"Well, it's not like you could really make a dish to wow Pixis with just normal pantry stuff," Petra said. "It'd be really difficult, at least. And you can bet Sasha'll be coming in with some top-grade game."

"In that case, it probably wasn't the best idea to go hunting," Eld said. "After all, Sasha's a master hunter, and anything they catch would be shitty in comparison to whatever she got. Plus, they'd be wasting valuable prep time trying to stalk a deer, or something."

"Not much we can do, Annie," Armin said, his own rifle jolting with every movement his horse made, the butt of the gun clanking against his ODM boxes. "We have to work as a squad."

"What are you even trying to catch?" Mike asked. "I get the rifles, but why the ODM? The gas and cables are way too loud to be sneaky—plus, you'd be causing so much commotion flying around and bouncing off trees that you'd scare all the animals away."

“Improvised weapons?” Gunther suggested. “But, just like Squad Leader Mike said—even if you catch something with an anchor or sword, the noise’ll still scare everything else away. The cons massively outweigh the cons—it’s just not worth it.”

“Oh, it’s not normal game they’re trying to catch,” Ymir chuckled, shaking her head. Jean’s face suddenly flushed at the memory of the failed hunt, and Armin winced.

Hange’s eyes widened. “Wait. . .” they said. “That boar, from the beginning of the episode—”

Connie began clapping. “They got it!” he grinned.

Jean grinned as they rode forwards. “I used to play in that forest as a kid,” he said. Forested, rocky mountains rose up as they rode forwards, the massive formation surrounded by leagues of pine trees. “It’s where the infamous Colossal Boar lives.”

“It’s a really pretty forest,” Mikasa said. “Big, too.” *It looks like home*.

“Shame,” Eren commented. “We didn’t get to go see it when we were there—and, well, I doubt we’ll be able to visit for a while.”

“That sucks,” Jean said. “I doubt it’s the same after, well. . .” he trailed off.

“We kinda tore it apart during the hunt,” Reiner chuckled.

“Oh, now I’m excited,” Marco smiled, leaning forwards. They’d all heard of the hunt, but none of them had ever gotten any details; Jean’s team had been stubbornly unwilling to give anything away, and Sasha’s side of the story was just a mess of her screaming ‘meat!’. Reiner and Connie weren’t the best storytellers, either.

An image of the boar from the poster at the beginning of the episode appeared on screen, silhouetted in a demonic purple. “If we can capture it and serve up its meat, victory will be ours.”

“*If* you can capture it.” Eld said. “That thing looks like it crawled its way out of hell, and got possessed by a few demons along the way.”

“But you did catch it, didn’t you?” Petra said.

“Sasha did,” Jean grumbled.

“Yeah,” Reiner laughed. “Trust us, it was all her.”

Armin looked over at him, eyes wide and brow furrowed with concern. “What about practicing your cooking technique?” he asked.

“I don’t have time to think about that!” Jean said, evidently frustrated.

“But what’s the point of having good meat if you can’t cook it?” Mike said. “You could end up ruining it. There’s a huge difference between,” he raised on hand, holding it above his head, “well-cooked meat,” he put his other hand near the ground, bending over to reach, “and shitty, charred mush. Look, taste, *smell*. . .”

“Well!” The two boys looked to the side as a familiar shout travelled across the grassy plains towards them. “Isn’t this a coincidence?”

Eren chuckled. “I’m starting to see why this is supposed to be a relaxing episode,” he said. “It’s pretty funny.”

“I think the word you’re looking for there is *extremely*,” Hange smiled.

Sasha, Connie, and Reiner rode a few metres away from them, their own rifles slung over ODM belts. “You guys. . .” Jean spluttered in disbelief. “Why?!”

“‘Cause they’re not dumb,” Oluo said patronizingly. “*Obviously*, unlike anicf—" Blood spurted from his mouth, and Petra wrinkled her nose as Eld picked up a box of tissues from the coffee table and dropped them in his lap.

“Sasha’s nose caught the scent of some prime meat,” Reiner explained.

“Is that so!” Mike raised his eyebrows. “Well, I can appreciate a good nose.” He nodded approvingly at her, and she grinned, throwing him a sharp salute.

“You too, sir!”

“I’m not just gonna let you take all the meat for yourself!” Sasha grinned. Unlike the other two, she had a bow and quiver of arrows strapped to her back, the shafts of the weapons rattling against each other as she rode. She yanked the reins of her horse, snapping them sharply. “Hyah!” She charged forwards, leaving Jean in the dust.

“You’re planning to catch the Colossal Boar with arrows?” Erwin’s eyebrows nearly touched his hairline.

“Yeah!” Connie boasted. “She’s a damn sharpshooter!”

“Damnit,” Jean breathed as the other group overtook them.

“Let’s go, Jean!” Armin shouted. “This is your backyard, right?” His eyes were fierce as he looked at the other boy. “We have the upper hand!”

“Familiarity with the land, versus experience hunting. . .” Petra moved her hands up and down, as if weighing the options. “I’m curious to see how this turns out.”

“You and me both,” Mike nodded.

The three of them walked slowly through the forest as sunlight filtered down through the trees, casting dappled patches of light on the grassy floor as birds chirped and bugs buzzed. Jean forged ahead, hands clenched by his sides; Armin had his hands close to his chest, looking from side to side, evidently worried; Annie followed the other two, looking at the ground, visibly bored out of her mind.

“Why are you walking tallest to shortest?” Levi asked, raising his eyebrows.

“I dunno—sir,” Jean added quickly. “It just kind of happened.”

“Uh. . .” Armin looked around, biting his lip. “Jean. . .” He looked forwards. “We’re not lost, are we?”

A few people laughed. “That’s a big change from ‘we’re gonna win this!’, isn’t it?” Moblit smiled.

"Gotta say," Hange grinned. "You guys are the most interesting batch of recruits we've gotten for a good couple of years."

"No," Jean drawled, a small scowl on his face.

"But," Armin frowned. "I swear we've passed that—"

"Oh, Armin," Sasha chuckled.

"No, we haven't!" Jean yelled, turning around to glare at him, eye twitching. "Look!" He pointed ahead at a snapped tree on the ground before another, the bark stripped away from half the trunk. "You might've seen a mark like this earlier," Jean said, putting a foot on the fallen log and a hand on the bare trunk. "But we're definitely closing in on it!"

"Yeah, sure," Ymir snorted. Jean glared at her, and she raised her eyebrows. "What? You're literally walking around in circles."

"We were not!" Jean protested. Ymir rolled her eyes, unconvinced.

Armin watched, mouth a straight line, eyebrows raised, eyes full to the brim of disbelief, while Annie looked to the side, a million miles away. The blonde girl sighed, brushing a strand of hair away from her face.

"See?" Ymir said. "Even they're unconvinced!"

"This was a year ago!" Jean yelled. "Drop it, already!"

"How can we?" Connie gestured at the screen. Jean threw his hands into the air.

"Hey, now." In another part of the forest, the other three cadets were in a similar position. "We're not going to find it by just wandering about," Reiner said. "I'd understand if there was snow," he continued. "But tracking footprints in mud? We'd need four or five days at least. . ."

Sasha grinned, cracking her knuckles. "That's 'cause you haven't met me before!"

"There it is, Connie!" Sasha interrupted, and Reiner made a small noise of shock, freezing.

A few people laughed at Reiner's dumbstruck expression. "It is kinda unbelievable," Connie said, shaking his head. "Guess you really are a master huntsman, huh, Sash?"

Sash and Connie were squatted next to a massive turd. "It's massive. . ." Connie muttered as Sasha poked at the fresh excrement with a stick, the pile making a squishing noise as she nudged it with the tip.

"Oh, gross!" Krista cried, cringing away from the screen.

"Why are you *touching* it?" Levi looked horrified. "That's a *literal* pile of shit!"

"We needed to check how fresh it was!" Sasha said.

"Yes," Sasha said. "It's a beast, all right." She tilted her head. "Fresh, too." Reiner watched on in horror, jaw agape, sweat on his cheeks. "Its den must be nearby."

"Reiner, your expression has never been more relatable," Eren chuckled.

"He looks like he was regretting his life choices right about then," Connie joked.

"Maybe the giant turd had something to do with it," Eld said dryly.

Reiner closed his mouth, frowning. "You guys just got lucky," he said. "But you won't find the boar itself so easi—"

"There it is!" Reiner let out a spluttering gasp as he spotted Sasha and Connie on top of a rock, peering down towards the other side.

"How lucky can you guys get?" Hange asked. "I mean, you track the boar there, find it, and it's *asleep*? All in—what, an hour?"

Massive, swine nostrils expanded and hairy jowls quivered as the boar let out a deep, rumbling snore, tusks glinting in the sun. "That's one *big* hog," Connie whispered as one of the animal's ears twitched and the camera moved down the trail of thick fur on its back, showing the three recruits crouched on top of the rock, clutching their weapons.

"Those tusks are *huge!*" Petra said. "And sharp!"

Eld shuddered. "You could gut someone on those!" he said. "That's fucking terrifying."

"That *thing* is terrifying," Gunther said. "It's like a Titan, but. . . a pig."

"You said it," Sasha said. "It's probably a colossal class."

"Do you people just name everything big 'colossal'?" Ymir asked.

"We don't do the naming," Erwin said. "But it's a pretty simple way to classify things, don't you think?"

She shrugged. "Whatever. Sir," she added.

Reiner stared ahead blankly, sweat running down his face. "Right. . ." He grit his teeth, blinking as he looked down. "We're going home." He turned walking down the path as the music sputtered to a stop. "That thing's uncatchable."

"C'mon, Reiner, have a little faith!" Sasha said.

"It was massive!" Reiner said. "You can forgive me for wanting to leave."

"Couldn't you just have stabbed it in its sleep?" Armin asked. Reiner groaned, putting his face in his hands.

Sasha ran after him, skidding to a halt in front of him. "*Hi*. . ." The screen flashed as she slapped Reiner across the face, his eyes wide with shock as spittle flew from his mouth in slow-motion. "*Yah!*"

"Whoa!" Gunther blinked, leaning back. "What?"

"Ugh!" A red mark blossomed across his cheek as sparkles flew through the air and heavenly music began playing.

"Uh. . ." Confused looks were exchanged throughout the room.

"What's happening?" Hange asked. "Why are there so many sparkles?"

"It must be another one of those 'exaggerated for effect' things," Mike said.

"*Mnph!*" Sasha drew her arm back and slammed him in the side of the head with her elbow, yellow and green light flying through the air as bright, tinkly noises followed the sparkles still raining down around the shocked blond.

"Did you elbow his head?" Ymir cackled.

She elbowed me?! **Reiner's brow was furrowed, teeth gritted in pain.**

"How can you say that?!" Sasha demanded, cheeks red, tears of passion in her eyes. "That makes me so sad!"

"Wow." Eld blinked. "You're really. . . uh. . . passionate about this, aren't you?"

"Of course!" she cried. "Can't you tell?"

She took a deep, shuddering breath, raising clenched fists in front of her as Reiner forced himself into a sitting position, looking up at her. "What would your ancestors think?" she continued, burying her face in her hands.

Ancestors. Reiner blinked, head throbbing.

"The world is connected, you know!" she wailed, voice muffled by her palms.

The world. . . Reiner inhaled sharply, pinching the bridge of his nose.

"Reiner?" Bertolt turned to look at him. "Are you—"

"Back," he muttered, eyes closed, head throbbing. "'M back." He blinked, clearing his blurry vision. "I'm back."

"Are you sure about that?" He glanced at Annie, who was watching the TV, arms crossed, expression blank.

"What do you mean by that?" he asked. She shrugged.

"Nothing. Just making sure."

He frowned, ignoring the way the back of his head throbbed and his chest felt heavy, as if weighed down by bricks of metal. "I'm *back*."

Reiner stared up at her in shock as she began to sob. "I'm sorry, Sasha," he said, standing up. "I haven't got a clue what you're on about, but I was in the wrong."

"But if you don't understand why. . ." Eren trailed off and shook his head. "Never mind. Forget I asked."

Connie frowned as he watched and stood up, looking to the side. "Well, if you get it, we're good," Sasha smiled, wiping away a tear. She pumped her fists, bending her knees. "Now!" she proclaimed. "Salute the meat!"

"Seriously?" Hange chortled.

Reiner threw his arms into a firm salute. "Yes, ma'am!"

"The real question is," Mike said. "How did you not wake up the boar with all that screaming?"

Sasha chuckled, scratching the back of her neck. "Yeah," she grinned sheepishly. "About that. . ."

"Oh, god," Ymir sighed.

"Hey, you two!"

"Huh?" Sasha and Reiner looked over at Connie's call to find themselves face-to-face with the goliath of a boar. It stood on top of the rock they'd been on only minutes before,

exhaling hot, heavy breaths as it glared at them with its one visible eye, the other scarred over and closed.

"Holy *shit!*" Mike stared, mouth gaping. "That *is* a big pig."

"How are you guys still alive?" Ymir demanded.

"Let's do this, Sasha!" Reiner said, clenching his fists.

"Weren't you gearing to leave only a minute ago?" Levi raised an eyebrow.

Sasha reached over her shoulder, whipping out her bow and an arrow in a lightning-fast movement. "Right on!"

"You take the first shot!" Reiner declared.

"Wow," Hange laughed. "Just. . . wow."

"The way you were talking, I expected you to run towards it," Mike chuckled, shaking his head.

"For shame, Reiner!" Eren joked, wagging a finger.

Reiner chuckled awkwardly at the laughter. Erwin turned in his seat, glancing at the boy.

"Okay!" Sasha ran forwards, Reiner following after her.

Connie and Sasha let out battle cries as they charged forwards, Connie whipping out his swords and Sasha loading her arrow, pulling the bowstring back, while Reiner ran after them a ways away, his own blades drawn.

"Dang, Reiner," Eren said. "You are *really* far back."

"You really didn't want to fight that boar, did you?" Mike smiled.

Levi frowned at the screen. *Is that it?*

Jean started at the sound of the boar's roar as he, Annie, and Armin walked up to a buff. As they watched, three consecutive clouds of dust erupted from beneath them in a separate part of the forest, rising higher than the trees as the earth shook.

"So you guys really *were* lost!" Eren said gleefully.

"Mother of Walls," Moblit stared at the screen, face pale. "I'm half-convinced that none of you were able to survive that, and you're sitting right next to me!"

Jean blinked in surprise, Armin and Annie staring down, confused, off the ledge. Armin let out a startled gasp as comprehension flooded the long-faced boy's features and his mouth opened wide in a scream of horror.

Jean flushed as laughter filled the room. "*Stop!*" He buried his face in a pillow.

"Oh, this is perfect!" Ymir slapped her knee as she howled with laughter. "Man," she wiped away a tear of mirth.

"If I'm ever feeling down," Eld chuckled. "I'll just think of that face. Doubt anything else could cheer me up quite as well."

The boar plowed through the forest, fur whipping around where there wasn't exposed skin from the criss-crossing scars, mane streaming behind it. Sasha clung onto her handles for dear life, anchors buried in the boar's rear, Connie and Reiner flying after them.

"Oh, jeez!" Hange's eyes widened. They'd known the boar was big, but they'd assumed that the drawing on the poster had been an overexaggeration.

"That thing's practically a Titan!" Gunther exclaimed.

"Look at all those scars." Marco shuddered. "I'm sure glad I didn't have to chase after that thing."

"How *did* you take it down?" Petra asked.

Jean groaned, and Connie giggled into his fist. "You'll see," Armin chuckled, shaking his head.

"Meat. . ." Sasha panted, eyes wide as she clung to the cables. "Meat!" she screeched as she was flung to the side, flapping in the wind like a stray flag as the boar changed direction.

"What the *hell?!*" Laughter exploded throughout the room.

"I. . ." Mike stared at the screen, eyebrows very nearly vacating their spot on his face. "Am concerned. And amused. Somewhere in between." He shook his head with a sigh, grinning. "Mostly amused."

"Watching this now, I get why you brought the ODM," Gunther said. "It probably would have been impossible to kill the thing without it. Or, you know, escape alive."

"It's the boar!" Jean shouted, drawing his blades as the other trio flew after them. "And they're here, too!"

"Well, duh." Ymir rolled her eyes. "Or did you not see the screaming maniac stuck to it?"

"It's fast!" Armin cried. "We'll never catch up to it!"

"Boar meat!" Sasha grabbed onto a fistful of the boar's thick fur, dragging herself forwards along its back to where an arrow was embedded by its spine. "Boar steaks! Boar sausages!"

"Oh, no." Petra stared at the screen. "She's lost it."

"Nah," Connie grinned. "She's just hungry."

"Does she always get like this when—" Eld paused, remembering her reaction after Krista had brought her bread.

"Yeah," Jean nodded. "Nutcase," he added with a fond snort.

"I resent that!" Sasha protested.

"Come on," Ymir said. "You love food the way Eren hates Titans."

"Hey!" Eren cried. "When did *I* get dragged into this?"

Armin shot ahead of the boar, yanking out a bundle of red potatoes from inside his jacket. "This way, Sasha!" he shouted, waving it in the air. "Some lovely potatoes for you!"

The laughter, which had barely died down, resumed in full force. Armin's face became redder than an overripe tomato, and he buried his face in his hands, shoulder curled in shame.

"Did you just try to lure her over with *potatoes?*" Eren gasped, clutching his ribs.

Eld took a deep breath, shoulder shaking. "Did it work?" he panted, eyes swimming with tears of laughter.

"Potato Girl," Annie muttered, almost to herself. Beside her, Bertolt let out a weak chuckle.

"Smoked!" Sasha snarled, clinging tightly onto the boar's back. "Boiled! Roasted!"

"That thing's running like the wind!" Oluo cried. "How are you hanging on? And *without* ODM?"

"Maybe it was exaggerated, too," Marco suggested. A few people glanced at the cadets who'd been present.

Reiner shrugged. "I dunno. At the time, I was just focusing on not being kicked all the way back home."

"Honestly, I wouldn't be too surprised if it was real," Annie said with a non-commital shrug.

"The scent of meat is too overpowering!" Armin gasped, looking down at her, the potatoes clenched uselessly in his left hand.

"There's your answer, Oluo!" Eld laughed.

"Oh, my god, Armin!" Sasha wheezed. "I never knew you were this funny!"

"You were *there!*" Jean said.

"I was focused on other things!"

"Has he always been this funny?" Connie asked, face split into a wide grin.

"Unintentionally." Mikasa smiled faintly.

Jean gasped as Sasha stood up on the back of the boar's neck. "So many ways to cook it!" she yelled, loading an arrow. "The best foodstuff in the world!" Her eyes flashed red as she shot into the air, flipping upwards through the sky.

"There's those red eyes again," Erwin said. "Exaggeration, again. I'm assuming." He glanced at the recruits.

"Yup," Connie confirmed with a nod.

"Hungry Sasha's freakish enough without glowing eyes," Ymir said. Sasha stuck her tongue out at her, despite the older girl's back facing her.

The boar grunted as it charged towards a rock face. "I'm talking about. . ." Sasha drew her bowstring back, rocketing into the stratosphere. "M-e-a-t!"

"Woah!" Armin blinked.

"Did—" Moblit stared at the screen, shocked. "Are you in the *sky?*"

"No way she's using ODM!" Eld said. "She's not even holding the triggers!"

“It must be the exaggeration again,” Mike said. “There seems to be a whole bunch of it in this episode. All for humour, I’m guessing.”

“How did you actually do it?” Hange asked. “I mean, it’s probably loads tougher to shoot a boar while you’re standing on it.”

“I think I jumped. . ?” Sasha frowned. “I don’t really remember. I was—”

“Stark-raving mad,” Annie monotoned.

She let the arrow go and it hit the boar in the forehead, burrowing into its skull. It let out a final squeal before falling over, tumbling to the ground, legs flying over its head as it skidded to a stop.

“Not bad,” Mike said, cocking an eyebrow. “You’d be a decent sharpshooter.”

“Too bad guns and arrows don’t do anything to Titans,” Erwin smiled faintly. “Otherwise I’d be seriously considering a new squad right now.” Sasha looked flattered at the praise.

“Thank you, sirs!”

Jean landed on a nearby tree branch and stared down at the Titan of a carcass in shock.

“Okay, so Sasha’s definitely winning,” Hange said. Quiet laughter rippled through the cadets again. “Seriously?” they grinned. “Come on! She’s got the meat, the skills. . . how could Jean beat her?”

“You’ll see!” the cadets chorused.

“Behold!” Connie shouted as they were wheeled through the streets of Trost on a rolling platform, the dead boar flopped on the rickety wooden wagon. “Make way for the majestic boar meat!”

“I can’t believe it,” Jean sighed, shaking his head. “Almost twenty years of that shitstain running around in the woods, and *Potato Girl*’s the one who takes it down.”

“I’ll take that as a compliment!” Sasha beamed.

Citizens cheered as the boar was pulled past the crowds. “Meaty-meat!” Sasha sang, sitting on the boar’s back, swaying back and forth happily, holding onto its fur. “Meaty-meat!” She giggled cutely, a pink blush of joy covering her cheeks as Connie continued shouting for people to make way.

“Wow.” Mike blinked. “That’s a huge change.”

“One moment, she’s a boar-killing machine, and the next, she’s just a cute little girl,” Hange nodded. “I like her!”

At the back of the crow stood Jean, Armin, and Annie, who watched as the carcass was rolled away, in the shadow cast by the afternoon sun on a wall of buildings. “For fuck’s sake!” Jean screamed, clenching his fists and stomping his foot as Armin and Annie turned to stare at him.

A few people laughed at his reaction. “Oh, shut up,” Jean growled.

An electric guitar riff screeched through the speakers as another sketchy image of Sasha appeared on screen.

"It's another one of those weird episode breaks!" Connie said.

"There are two?" Jean looked at Marco. "Is this normal?"

The dark-haired boy shrugged. "Well, like Omni said: it's an OVA, and the episode breaks are different. I've never seen this, either."

Hange glanced at the timestamp at the bottom of the screen. "It's about fifteen minutes into the episode," they said. "And the entire thing's twenty-five minutes long. I'm gonna guess that the first break was at around eight minutes. So, if my math's right—" they shot everybody in the room a quick, individual look, as if daring them to suggest that it wasn't, "—then we should have one more break after this."

This time, the girl was dressed in a blouse, top few buttons undone, tie hanging loosely around her neck, skirt flying through the air as she stomped furiously, knee-high socks slipping down her legs from the force of the movements, singing furiously into a microphone as she strummed a bright blue guitar, sweat flying from her face, hair a wild mess.

"You can play the guitar?" Armin asked, surprised.

"Nope!" Sasha tilted her head, looking at the screen. "It must be that Mr. Ee-sa-ya-ma guy making thing up again."

"But didn't Ih-suh-yah-muh make *us* up?" Connie asked.

Jean groaned, putting his head in his hands and rubbing his temples. "I'm getting headache."

"Too much existentialism," Mike agreed with a grimace, pinching the bridge of his nose.

Behind her, Connie danced furiously, sandals flapping on his feet as he smacked a tambourine over his head. Reiner was in the very back, banging a drum set wildly, teeth gritted.

A few people laughed at the ridiculous poses Isayama had chosen to draw the boys in.

The subtitles showed the pink-to-yellow text at the bottom of the screen as, in all capitals*, I AM HUNGRY*, followed by three eighth notes. A drum beat and small clank of a tambourine ended the tune.

"Of course you are," Krista giggled, smiling.

"Do you think that's the name of the song?" Armin wondered.

"I doubt it's actually a song," Ymir said bluntly. "It's barely a couple of notes."

The ringing of the bell echoed through Trost as the last rays of sun hit the tower of the military base. Eren grunted as he struggled to lift a crate from a wagon.

A few people chuckled as they watched Eren's losing battle with the box. "I thought you were number five, Eren," Petra said with a small, teasing smile.

"It was heavy!" Eren protested.

"You carried a massive boulder across Trost," Armin pointed out, finally giving into the temptation of joining the teasing.

Eren had to physically keep himself from spitting out a hurtful comeback. He settled for, "It was the Titan," trailing off lamely.

"Wha—" he turned as Mikasa approached him, carrying a towering stack of three boxes almost as tall as she was, without a hint of difficulty, looking almost bored. Eren watched, eyes wide with shock, sweat glistening on his face from the exertion of budging the single pack.

The cadets burst out laughing. Annie glanced at Mikasa as she patted a disgruntled-looking Eren on the shoulder.

"That shouldn't be possible," Moblit muttered as Mikasa awkwardly extended an arm for Petra to feel. "I mean, Eren's a Titan, older, and, biologically stronger. . ."

"Yeah." Hange shrugged, leaning against Erwin's calf (they had discovered, after much trial and error, that he was the only one cordial enough to not kick them in the head). "But, honestly, I gave up on common sense when it comes to human strength after I met Levi."

"I doubt you had common sense in the first place, shitty glasses," Levi grumbled, nudging them in the ribs with his heel. They laughed, leaning away.

"Ooh, touchy! Jealous that you're not the only super-soldier anymore?"

"I don't give a shit how strong she is," Levi retorted, "as long as she stops glaring at me every time she sees me."

The wagon rattled on its wheels as Mikasa set the crates down and reached for the one Eren was struggling with. "Hey, leave it!" he said, shoving her roughly away.

"But. . ." she moved forwards, reaching out towards him.

A sudden thought hit Erwin. *Levi and Mikasa are both strong*, he thought. *Almost inhumanly so. It's almost supernatural.* He thought of Omni's explanation of the Homepage and their story status. *Does that mean Isayama intended it to be like this? Why?* He thought of the trial, and the reports he'd read about Eren and Mikasa. *So we could get Eren in the Corps? So someone could protect him?* He frowned. *There* must *be more to this. There's no way such an important detail could be chalked up to 'training', or something else mundane like that*.

"No 'buts'!" Eren pushed her back in both shoulders, and she stumbled away. "Leave it!"

"Jerk," Jean grumbled. A few mutters of agreement rose throughout the room, and Eren felt his ears flush.

"Sorry," he muttered to Mikasa.

"It's fine," she whispered.

"Excuse me. . ." The two of them looked to the side at the quiet inquiry. "Do you know if Jean-Boy—" Mrs. Kirschtein stood at the entrance of the courtyard, carrying a basket of

bread, one hand held nervously to her chest, hair pulled back into a tight ponytail. "I mean, if Jean Kirschtein is around?"

She looks *like a mom*, Krista thought, looking at the woman. Everything about her, from the apron and housedress to her plump, kind face, just screamed *home* and *family*. Such a far cry from what she'd grown up with.

Ymir had her arm propped up on her leg, other arm draped casually over Krista, chin resting in the palm of her hand. *Dunno why the dumbass is so pissed about the attention?* She could understand not wanting to be the centre of attention—heck, she'd done everything in her power to stay *out* of the spotlight (not that it was working)— and she could definitely get being an asshole, but the events in the scene that she remembered would be following were, in her opinion, taking it too far. Memories of an empty stomach and cold, dark streets flashed through her mind, and she winced.

Jean, Armin, and Annie sat at their own table at the side of the mess hall, looking down at their plates. Jean's fists were clenched, brows furrowed tightly as he stared down at his bread. *The showdown is tonight*, he thought. *To beat Potato Girl, I need an even better main ingredient*. . .

"I dunno where you're gonna find that," Hange said. "I don't care what you say!" they added, louder, as the cadets began talking, putting their hands in the air. "I stand firm in my belief that Sasha's going to win! If I'm wrong—and I doubt I am—you can bash me about it later."

Sasha beamed. "Thank you, Squad Leader!"

He raised his arm to scratch the back of his neck and started as his elbow bumped into his mug, knocking it over.

Eren snorted into his fist, and Jean's face flushed red in a mix of embarrassment and shame. "What happened?" Eld asked.

Eren opened his mouth to answer, and Jean lunged across the room to grab his mouth from behind him. "You'll see," Armin said simply as Mikasa separated the two scuffling boys next to him.

He tutted, scowling as he picked up the mug and set it back on the table. "Is Jean Kirschtein here?" He glanced up as the door was thrown open and a Garrison officer called into the room.

He stood up, walking over to the stairs. "Yes, sir! I am he!"

"'I am he'?" Connie snickered.

"You couldn't have just said 'that's me'?" Oluo raised an eyebrow.

The older soldier glanced down at him, a hand propped casually on his hip. "Your mother is here to speak to you," he said.

A few people inhaled. "Dang," Hange muttered.

Jean's eyes widened. "Huh?" he squeaked.

"Jean-Boy!" Around the room, other cadets turned to look as Mrs. Kirschtein rushed up to Jean, the handle of her basket slung over her arm.

"Yikes." Mike grimaced. "Talk about embarrassing."

"You—!" Jean stepped back, staring in horror.

Levi wrinkled his nose. "You're just fucking the shit up even more for yourself," he said. Jean started at the words. "Yeah, it was embarrassing, but you didn't have to be such a pissstain about it."

"Jean-Boy, why haven't you come home yet?" Mrs. Kirschtein placed a hand on Jean's chest and he reared up, gritting his teeth, eyes the size of dinner plates as whispering and giggles began rippling through the room. "Mrs. Wagner's little boy, Thomas, has already come home!" Eren and Mikasa had walked into the room, and stood to the side, watching with the others. Jean looked ready to either bolt or faint as Mrs. Kirschtein continued speaking. "You really are a problem child," she sighed, looking down. "Did you spill soup on yourself or something?" She reached forwards, pulling out a handkerchief and wiping at the wet stain near Jean's crotch. "You can be so clumsy at times."

Mike inhaled through his teeth. "Eek," he muttered.

Eld nodded, skin prickling with secondhand embarrassment. "Honestly, kid? That sucks." He shook his head.

Jean gasped, an expression of embarrassed fury overtaking his face. "Stop that!" Mrs. Kirschtein started, looking up in surprise.

"No need to yell at her," Eren muttered, almost offhandedly. Jean grimaced.

"Yeah, I know. Shit, I know, okay, Jaeger?"

"But, Jean—" The other cadets watched from across the room, various expressions, ranging from disgusted, to uninterested, to faint smiles of amusement, on their faces.

"It's fine!" Jean shoved her away. "Just go home already!"

"You *did* end up visiting her, though, didn't you?" Hange asked, almost judgementally.

"*Yes*," Jean stressed the word, crossing his arms.

"Then. . ." Mrs. Kirschtein hesitated for a moment before turning to Eren, forcing a smile back onto her face. "These are for everyone—" She reached into her bag and began placing apples on the table, while Jean watched on in obvious irritation.

"That was nice of her," Krista said quietly.

"You don't need to do that!" Jean yelled, lunging forwards and swiping the fruit off the table with his arm.

A few people gasped, and Levi scowled. "That's going way overboard," Petra told the humiliated youth.

"I know," he muttered, slouched against the couch.

"Jean!" Eren frowned, turning away to pick up the apples

“Jean-Boy!” Mrs. Kirschtein gasped, then quickly turned to address the rest of the hall. “I know he’s a problem child, but can everyone please be friends with him?” she pleaded. Jean stared at the ground, fists clenched, lips pursed.

She really is a good mother, Mikasa thought. *He doesn’t know how lucky he is*. Something in her chest twisted at the thought and memory of her own mother. *Not just once*—twice.

Mrs. Kirschtein watched him, brow furrowed in concern, as Eren moved to stand next to Mikasa, his arms full of fruit. “Oh, I almost forgot, Jean-Boy. . .” Mrs. Kirschtein reached into the covered basket and pulled out a box. “I brought your favourite—”

“Just go home!” Jean screamed. The door slammed shut with a *bang* that resonated throughout the entire hall, leaving Jean to stand by the door, chest heaving, shoulders rising and falling dramatically with every deep, infuriated breath he took.

“Dude,” Connie muttered. “She was just trying to bring you some snacks.”

“I *know*.” Jean’s face burned, and he ignored the stares bearing into him from all directions. “Jeez, I *know*, okay?”

The other cadets watched in shock. “Y—” Eren and Mikasa looked up at him from the ground, frowning. “You should be nicer to your mom,” Eren said, still holding the apples. “Jean-Boy—” Jean turned around with a snarl, teeth grinding against each other. “I mean, Jean.”

Jean grimaced at the glare on-screen Mikasa was giving him. He hadn’t noticed it before, wrapped up in his own self-pity. *Of course they’re pissed*. He dragged a hand over his face, wincing as he thought of Eren’s mother’s last moments. *Shit.*

Flames whooshed in their brackets in the empty hall and Jean held out a hand, revealing a small, gold key.

A few eyebrows were raised. “Is that Eren’s key?” Connie asked.

“No.” Eren reached into his shirt and pulled it out. “Mine’s bigger. And the top part’s fancier.”

“That one’s flatter,” Levi added. “The pin’s shorter, and the bits are thicker. The entire thing’s flatter, too.” Hange leaned back, shooting him a quizzical look, and he made a motion semblance to gripping two thin objects and wiggling them around in a small space. They nodded and looked back at the TV.

Armin stared down in shock, eyes wide. “A—” he looked up, raising a shaky hand. “Are you serious, Jean?!” His exclamation echoed in the cavernous stone hall.

“What’s the key for?” Moblit asked.

“Can’t be anything good, by the way Arlert reacted,” Mike said.

Jean's eyes were wild, a manic grin stretched across his face. "Apparently," he said, sweat sliding down his cheek. "There's beef in the officers' pantry." He bared his teeth in a wicked, canine smile, eyes glinting. "I'll use that," he breathed.

A few jaws dropped. "You're planning to *steal?*" Bertolt squeaked, speaking for the first time that episode.

"You didn't actually do it, right?" Mike demanded, looking at the ash-haired teen.

"No, I didn't!"

"Not for lack of trying, though," Annie muttered.

"O—" Armin took a quaky step back. "Out of the question! I can't *steal!*" He raised his arms slightly. "I-I've always been slow and awkward." Sweat rolled down his face as he smiled, eyes wide and shadowed, mouth twisted in an insane grin even more haunting than Jean's.

Connie leaned away from the TV, looking slightly uncomfortable. "Hey, Armin. . ." he chuckled uneasily. "Buddy. . . you good?"

"Just nervous," Armin squeaked.

"Even in races, I was always last over the line," he laughed, voice echoing as the image became distorted, rippling on screen, his face an over-exposed yellow, the flames twisting in the air behind him. "Even playing hide-and-seek, I'd never be able to stand the tension and would always giggle."

"That's 'cause you're fucking insane," Oluo muttered, goosebumps prickling his arms and the back of neck as the boy laughed on screen. Petra smacked his arm, giving him a reproachful stare.

"Don't be rude!"

"It's frickin' terrify—" By now, the cadets had grown as used to the frequent tongue-biter as the veterans, and didn't even look around when he began screeching.

"Armin. . ." Jean frowned, him and Annie watching on, confused as Armin's state of panic grew to new extremes.

"To actually steal something. . ." Armin's shoulders began shaking, and, suddenly, without warning, he whirled around, charging down the hall. "I can't do it!" he screamed.

"Dude!" Jean complained.

Sasha stifled her laughter in her hands. "Sorry, sorry!" she giggled as he stared at her. "Sorry!" She burst into laughter. "It's just so. . ." she trailed off, tittering.

"You two should form a comedy duo," Eld suggested, mouth curved into a small smile. "You'd make a killing, you would."

"Huh?" Annie turned to watch him as he ran.

"Hey!" Jean cried, raising a hand as Armin ran up the stairs, pumping his arms furiously, panting like he'd already run a mile. "Where are you going?!"

"To the infirmary, apparently," Armin muttered, and the corner of Annie's mouth twitched. The veterans, as well as recruits who hadn't known about what had happened next, glanced at him, curious.

Armin's foot slipped on a step and he screamed as his shin landed against the edge of the stair in a flash of comically exaggerated orange light.

"Sweet Sina." Mike's eyes looked seconds away from falling out of his skull.

"Oh, goddesses." Petra's shoulders were shaking as Armin's face turned red and he buried it in his hands.

He gasped, eyes flying open, and fell back with a monstrous shriek, spittle flying from his mouth in waves as he rolled on his back, clutching his banged shin to his chest.

"This should *not* be that funny," Sasha howled.

"Ymir!" Krista held onto the taller girl's shoulders, keeping her upright, face red, as she cackled openly, tears of joy streaming down her shoulders.

"It's fine," Armin said, noticing Hange glancing at him. "They healed up pretty quickly."

"Well," Hange's face split into a grin so quickly it was almost instantaneous. "In that case—" they cut themselves off with a screech of laughter, bending over at the waist and slapping Moblit hard on the back.

"I'm sorry, Jean. . ." Two heavily bandaged legs were shown lying on top of hospital linen. Jean sat on the bench next to Armin as he lay in bed, a small hook holding a bag of ice over his forehead, Annie leaning against a nearby wall. "With this battered body," Armin continued. "I don't think I'll be of any help to you. . ."

"'Battered body'?!" Eren held onto Armin's shoulder as he laughed, Mikasa looking stuck between joining in and being disapproving. "You hit your shin! How did *both legs* get fucked up?"

"I don't know!" Armin was as red as a spray of Titan blood. "It just happened!"

"This episode," Gunther sighed, rubbing his forehead. "I swear. . ."

Annie pushed herself off the wall, stepping forwards and placing a hand on her hip. "I'm out, too," she declared quietly. Jean gasped, and both boys looked at her. "I can't risk getting caught," she said.

"Finally got bored?" Hange teased.

The girl shrugged. "Yeah."

"Annie!" Jean looked hurt. Annie looked away, picking at her thumbnail.

"But, Annie!" Jean stared at her. "I thought your aim was to join the Military Police as well!"

"It was probably smart of her to back out when she did," Erwin commented. "If you were caught stealing, it would've gone on your permanent records. Even if you still got into the top ten afterwards, the Police still could have rejected you. If you didn't get kicked out, that is."

An awkward silence fell. “Oh,” Jean said quietly. Mike rolled his eyes, nudging Erwin with his elbow.

Annie glanced at him from the side of her eye. “Sorry,” she said before closing her eyes and walking out of the room. Jean watched, eyes wide, mouth agape, and grit his teeth as the door closed with a small *click*.

Ominous music played as Jean crept through the dark hallway, hand on one wall. *Beef*, he thought. *To beat Potato Girl, I need to snag the unbeatable beef*. The image faded to show Jean’s point of view as he crept through the hall, half-crouched, head bent low.

“You’re shitty at stealth,” Levi informed him.

“I was trying to be quiet!” the boy protested.

“You’re acting like a goddamned hunchback, that’s what you’re doing,” Levi said. “Anybody with half a brain could figure out that you’re not meant to be there.”

“Is Captain Levi seriously teaching Jean how to steal?” Armin whispered in Eren’s ear.

Eren frowned, thinking back to the conversation he and Petra had had while cleaning the castle, then shrugged. “I dunno.”

I’m a ruthless man, who knows that the end justifies the means.* He grit his teeth, glaring ahead in determination. *I’m not little Jean-Boy, problem child!

A few people laughed. “I don’t know, Jean,” Connie snickered. “You sure are acting like one.”

“You’re barely a *man*,” Ymir added, grinning wickedly. “And you’re far from *ruthless*.”

Jean scowled. “Oh, shut it!”

He leaned against the wall and peered out around the corner, eyes bright pinpricks in the darkness. He inhaled sharply, pressing himself back against the wall as two Garrison soldiers walked by, laughing and talking loudly. He breathed heavily as he slid a ways down the wall, sweat beading on his face.

“Dude!” Connie threw his hands in the air. “You’re not gonna be able to do it! Just leave!”

“You’re wasting precious prep time!” Eld added.

“Beef isn’t gonna beat fresh-caught boar!” Gunther said. “Just try to figure something else out!”

“You guys do know this happened, like, a year ago, right?” Jean said.

“I don’t think they care,” Marco said.

“Kirschtein!” He yelped, jolting up straight, arms snapping to his sides. The bearded soldier who had brought Mrs. Kirschtein into the mess hall walked up to him, scowling, thick, bushy eyebrows drawn together. “You made me hunt everywhere for you,” he grumbled, holding out a package wrapped in red cloth. “Here.” He shook it in front of Jean’s face when he didn’t take it straight away. “Your mother told me to give this to you,” he said.

"That was nice of her," Krista said. "She must love you a lot."

"Yeah," Jean muttered, oblivious to the blank, sad look in Krista's eyes. "Yeah, she does."

"Ever considered that she might love you *too* much?" Ymir asked scathingly. "I mean, if it were me, I would've just tossed that thing out the window and gone on my merry way."

"Yeah, well, you're an asshole."

"Uh—" Jean held his hands up, and the man dropped it into his palms, staring down at it, confused.

"What on earth are you doing here?" the soldier asked.

"*Ooh!*" Sasha said. "Busted!"

Jean started, stumbling as he turned to face him. "Um. . ." he glanced to the side, not meeting the man's eyes. "Bathroom. . ."

"Seriously?" Eren snorted. "That's, like, the most generic excuse ever!"

"What are you talking about?" the man asked, putting a hand on his hip. "The bathroom's back there." He pointed a thumb over his shoulder.

"I can't believe he bought that," Petra chuckled, shaking her head.

Five birds flew through the sky, dark silhouettes against the heavy grey clouds, tendrils of cirrus clouds trailing above them, the pink and orange of the sunset slowly giving way to the dark blue of twilight.

This world really is beautiful, Mikasa thought. *Beautiful. . . but cruel*.

Jean knelt on the ground in the courtyard and pulled away the layers of cloth wrapped around the box. He pulled a folded piece of paper out from the package and opened it up, looking down at the scribbled message. "*Dear Jean-Boy*," Mrs. Kirschtein had written. "*Please eat this, and carry on working hard.*"

"That's sweet," Petra said with a small smile, thinking about the letters she and her family regularly exchanged.

Eren wondered if Carla would have brought him food and visited, had she survived. Or would she simply send letters? He frowned, unsettled, when he realized he didn't know the answer.

His eyes moved across the paper as the last rays of light shone down on him making the stone pillars glow in the sunset. "*Don't be a burden on other people, you hear?*" His brow was furrowed, lips pursed as he looked down at the page. "*Love, Mom*."

Krista smiled sadly. *She really does love him*.

"Kch—!" Jean clenched his fist, scrunching up the note and shoving it roughly into his jacket. He reached forwards, lifting the lid off the box. "Huh—?" His eyes widened in shock.

Nestled into the box in a bed of lettuce, next to some small cubes of cheese, two heads of broccoli, and a tomato, was an omelette, a small glob of tomato sauce laid on top of the yellow surface that seemed to shine in the late evening sun.

Sasha suddenly let out an indignant, half-gasp of a noise, leaping to her feet and waving her arms about, spluttering furious. "You—you!" She pointed an accusing finger at Jean, glaring at him. "You!"

Ymir began laughing, and Krista gasped quietly. "Oh!" she said in sudden realization.

"You *chea*—mph!" Sasha's disgruntled noise of protest was muffled by Connie's hand as he grabbed her and yanked her back onto the couch, collapsing on top of Jean in an uncomfortable, but amusing (to the others in the room) dogpile.

"What?" Moblit asked. Sasha, mouth still covered, jabbed a finger at Jean, poking him in the cheek.

Hange suddenly gasped, and Erwin made a small, 'ah', noise. "He's going to enter the omelette, isn't he?" Hange asked.

Connie suddenly yelped, drawing his hand away as if he'd been shocked. "Did you just *lick* me?"

"Cheater!" Sasha yelled again, pointing at Jean. This time, her finger jabbed him in the eye.

"I love this episode!" Ymir said gleefully, watching as Jean and Sasha bickered, Jean covering his left eye with one hand.

"*Om-e-lette!*" The scene faded into a flashback of a young Jean sitting at the dining table, a mug on the table in front of him, banging the wooden surface with a fork and knife as he kicked his feet, which couldn't even reach the ground, around. "Om-e-lette!" He smiled as a younger Mrs. Kirchtein walked towards the table, holding a plate.

Choruses of 'aw's filled the room, and Jean flushed.

"You're adorable!" Petra asked.

"Oh!" Krista pressed her hands to her heart. "I could just eat you up!" Both Ymir and Reiner looked slightly put out.

"Here we go!" she smiled, placing the plate in front of him. "You really love your omelettes, don't you, Jean-Boy?"

That's sweet. Mikasa cracked a smile at the sight of the small, enthusiastic boy.

Jean's chubby, childish face broke into a wide grin as he looked at the steaming dish in front of him, letting out a delighted laugh.

"You're so *fat!*" Connie laughed. Jean knocked him hard on the head, scowling.

"Can it, cueball," he grumbled, and Connie raised his hands, though he was still grinning slightly.

The scene changed, showing a slightly older Jean standing in the open doorway, sobbing as Mrs. Kirschtein bent over him, his clothes rumpled and covered with dust. "I can't understand if you just stand there and cry, can I, Jean-Boy?" she asked calmly. Jean shook his head, letting out a hiccupping wail.

Armin winced, recognizing the signs of bullying immediately. For a second, he wondered if that was why he'd been so quick to butt heads with Eren—the brunet certainly *wasn't* a bully, but he definitely had many of the traits of one.

She knelt, putting her hands on his plump cheeks and wiping away his tears with a handkerchief. "Now," she said gently, running a thumb over his face. "What happened?"

"Chubby eggplant," Connie whispered. Jean scowled, elbowing him, harder this time. The boy winced, and dropped the subject.

The scene changed one last time. Mrs. Kirschtein lay in bed, coughing, and the door creaked open, letting in a sliver of light. It opened wider, and Jean stepped in, carrying a plate and mug of water on a tray. "How are you?" She sat up, propping herself up with her arms. "Do you think you can eat?"

"You really are a good son, aren't you?" Marco smiled.

Jean scowled. "Shut it, you," he muttered, but there wasn't any real bite behind the words.

She reached forwards with a small chuckle, taking the tray. "Thank you," she said with a wan smile. Her hair was dishevelled, skin pale and sweaty, but her eyes were warm as she looked at Jean. "You really are a sweet kid." Jean glanced away, not meeting her eyes.

"Take the compliment!" Sasha told on-screen Jean. "Take the damn compliment!"

Back in the present, Jean stared down at the omelette, eyes wide, breathing shakily. "Mom. . ." he whispered as a drum beat began playing.

"Oh ho ho!" Hange gasped as the music picked up. "The competition's starting soon, isn't it?"

"Yes!"

Flames rushed across the screen, transitioning into the next scene as a heavy rock riff began playing. "*Ist das unser Schicksal*," a woman sang.

Eren's skin suddenly prickled at the familiar tune. "This is. . ."

"It's that song," Mikasa muttered. "From the Fall of Shinganshina."

Bertolt twitched in his seat, and Reiner grabbed his forearm. "Don't," he said quietly.

Bertolt wetted his lips, biting down on the lower one. "I wasn't going to do anything," he muttered.

"*Aaaaaah!*" Jean screamed, face twisted with determination, as he cooked, flames flying around him. "*Oder unser Wille?*"

"Shit, that's dramatic," Mike chuckled. "You good there, kid?"

"I bet Sasha's is way worse," Moblit smiled.

Armin stood at the side of the kitchen, crutches propped up under his arms, staring ahead in shock, Annie watching impassively next to him, holding a pile of plates and cutlery.

"I have a question," Eld said. "If you're just entering your mom's omelette, then why do you need such a massive fire? Are you just heating it up?"

"Yeah," Jean said with a small shrug. "Basically."

"Then. . ." Gunther trailed off, shaking his head. "Right. Exaggeration. Forgot."

"Meaty-meat!" Sasha roared, holding two massive butcher's knives, light glinting off the blades, as sparks and chunks of meat flew past her. "*Wir anic kämpfen. . .*" Sasha's eyes glowed a wild red as she slashed the knives over a roaring fire.

"Told you." Moblit shook his head with a small, short laugh.

"I never thought I'd get this tense about a *cooking* battle," Mike snorted. "Eh. The world's a strange place, I guess." A few people nodded, laughing.

Connie and Reiner worked at another table, Connie holding up a pumpkin and a head of lettuce, eyebrows raised, scowling critically at them, while Reiner cut a piece of meat into slivers, brows drawn tightly together, eyes squinted in concentration.

"Really, Reiner?" Jean laughed. "It's a big thing, sure, but no need to be *that* serious."

"How dare you!" Sasha cried indignantly. "I'll have you know, food is one of the most important things in the world!"

"Says the girl who was swinging around on a dead boar earlier."

"Says the guy who didn't even cook!" Sasha shot back. "Though he is being a bit too stern about it," she admitted.

Reiner chuckled. "Well. . ." he spread his hands, grinning. "It was an important contest, right? I didn't want to mess anything up for Sasha."

"That's nice," Connie said. "But it didn't really h—" This time, it was Jean who slapped his hand over Connie's mouth. "Mrph!"

"Don't give anything away!" Jean exclaimed. "I wanna see their faces when they find out!"

"Can't you just tell us?" Mike asked.

"Nope!"

"*Bis dieser. . .*" In another room of the compound, illuminated by a hanging, candle-lit, wooden light, Mikasa, wearing nothing but a white sports bra and purple exercise shorts, punched the air, gloved fists clenched tightly, exhaling sharply through her teeth with every strike.

"Huh?" Krista furrowed her brows.

“That’s certainly a. . . strange scene to show,” Erwin said. “Especially at this point in the competition.

“Mikasa?” Eren asked. “You didn’t watch the contest?”

“Neither did you,” Mikasa said.

“*Yargh!*” Countless cooking instruments, including, but not limited to, a rolling pin, spatula, meat hammer, scale, and kettle, flew around Jean as he leapt into the air, eyes wide, screaming while reaching forwards. “*Heiße Wind unsere Flügel nimmt!*”

“The way this is going, I can see two outcomes,” Hange said. “Either Sasha cooks something so ridiculously amazing and delicious—which I’m still counting on, by the way—” The girl in question grinned, and Jean rolled his eyes. “Or Jean somehow, *somehow* beats her with his mom’s omelette. And, honestly, both scenarios seem equally likely, based on how nutty Pixis can be, sometimes.”

“Rich of you to call someone else nutty,” Levi quipped dryly. Hange slapped his knee, and he batted them away.

“Or,” Mike said. “The unforeseen third option.”

“Which is?” Moblit asked.

“That Pixis eats both of them and leaves, ‘cause he’s a drunken asshole.” The cadets burst into laughter, and Mike grinned.

Mikasa grunted as she did a sit up, face shadowed by her hair, abs tightening as she pulled herself into a sitting position.

Petra whistled, then slapped Oluo’s shoulder. “Stop ogling!”

Jean and Connie were looking away, faces bright red, while Armin buried his burning crimson face in a pillow. Bertolt had covered his eyes, entire body shaking, sweating bullets, while Reiner’s mouth hung open as he stared. Annie glared at him, then grabbed the side of his face, forcing his gaze towards the wall.

“Nice,” Ymir said, grinning. A pink-faced Krista smacked her on the upper arm, and she laughed.

Eren frowned at the others. “What’s up with them?” he asked. Mikasa frowned, and half the occupants of the rom rolled their eyes behind their hands.

“Boobs,” Jean muttered, face looking as if were seconds from exploding. “Boobs. Boobs.”

“*Mikasa* boobs.” Connie muttered into the cushion. “And *abs*.”

“Nice six-pack, by the way,” Hange commented. Mikasa nodded.

“Meaty-meat!” Sasha screamed, skin damp with sweat as she continued carving away at the meat like a season Survey Corps veteran at a starving Titan.

“Oh, jeez, that’s intense,” Eren muttered.

“Yeah,” Gunther nodded.

“Now, that,” Eld said. “I can imagine as being real.”

Sweat flew from Mikasa's arms as she thrust her fists forwards and turned. Her hair sparkled in the dim light of the room as she threw a final punch and the camera moved out, displaying her upper body in great detail. She lowered her arms as a bell rang.

In a way, Mikasa's training regime just adds to the ridiculousness of the scene, Erwin thought. *I suppose it is a nice contrast from the previous episodes.*

Yet another gong rang out as the final episode break appeared.

"Who do you think this one's gonna be about?" Hange asked.

"My bet's on Jean," Connie said immediately. The others all turned to look at him. "Think about it," he said. "The entire episode's about him, right? And the past two breaks have all been about Sasha."

"Then wouldn't it make sense for a third Sasha-centric break?" Armin pointed out. "Three would make more sense than two-thirds."

"Oh." Connie's face fell. "Yeah, that does make sense."

"Well, we *can* just see," Eren said.

Erwin lay on the wood-panelled ground, barefoot and wearing a pair of white lounge pants and a blue sweatshirt as he propped his head up, elbow resting on the ground.

"Huh?" Oluo's jaw dropped. "Commander?!"

"What are you *wearing*?" Levi stared at the blonde's getup with an expression of horror.

"I think we'd both like the answer to that question," the man in question replied.

He scanned the pages of a manga, a bag of potato chips lying next to him, and a stack of other manga volumes near his feet.

"Those books are weird," Connie said.

"Look at the writing on the spine!" Petra said. "It's Ja-pan-ees!"

Lazing around after lunchtime on a workday*. . . the caption read. *Ah, it'd be awesome if all the Titans kicked the bucket during my nap~

"Wow," Mike joked. "I never thought the Commander of the Survey Corps would be so lazy."

"It's *not me*," Erwin snapped, voice coming out harsher than he'd intended. Mike raised his eyebrows, and Levi glanced at him from the corner of his eye.

Flames flickered in braziers as a tense drum beat began playing. Hordes of cadets stood in front of the stage, which had been decorated lavishly: a red carpet had been layed across centre stage, and, on it, was a table, covered with a white cloth. Pixis sat in a chair at the table, Anka and Gustav on either side of him behind it. More Garrison soldiers stood to the sides of the stage, where two food carts had been placed, facing each other from across the platform.

"Here it comes, guys," Connie said, grinning as he bounced up and down in his seat.

Annie, Jean, and Armin stood behind one of the carts. Annie's expression was calm and detached, while Armin watched the proceedings curiously, and Jean's face was curiously neutral.

"That's a pretty outfit, Annie," Krista said, gesturing at the blue lace-up the other girl wore over her dark hoodie.

"Oh. . . thanks."

"You mean you actually own other clothes?" Jean joked. The blonde stared at him, icy blue eyes cold. He slowly shrivelled in his seat and turned around, shoulders hunched.

On the other side of the stage, Sasha held onto the handle of her cart, a confident smile on her face, while Reiner and Connie stood on either side of her, beads of sweat on their faces, lips pursed into straight lines.

"That's a pretty dress!" Krista said. "It looks really good on you!"

"What are you, the fashion police?" Ymir interrupted before Sasha could say something. Krista pouted, and Sasha sniffed.

"Well, I happen to appreciate Krista's compliments!" She smiled, and Krista beamed.

"Hm." Pixis, a napkin tucked into the collar of his shirt, glanced at her with a small smile before turning to the cadets watching. "It looks like you've both brought your A-game to this contest," he said.

"I thought that was a cravat for a second," Hange said. "Man, I've been hanging around Levi for too long. . ."

"I'm gonna break your glasses, four-eyes," Levi threatened.

The beat of the music intensified as Shadis began speaking, brow furrowed, glaring ahead as if they were at the camp. "We will now commence," he called, "the cook-off between. . ." Jean watched the proceedings calmly, not a hint of trepidation on his profile. "104th Squad Members, Jean Kirschtein. . ." Sasha's grin was gone, brow furrowed, beads of sweat on her face, glaring ahead at Jean. "And Sasha Braus!"

"Looks like things are getting serious, now," Moblit said.

"Come on," Mike implored. "Just a hint—"

"No way!"

The cheers that sounded out from the audience were overwhelming as they threw their fists into the air and screamed, whooped, and hollered, a battle theme playing in the background. "The first dish!" Shadis announced. "Sasha Braus!"

"I can't wait to see this!" Hange rubbed their hands together. "I don't care how much the episode's been focusing on Jean—I still think it's gonna pull a 180 and have Sasha win, instead!"

"I dunno," Mike said. "I still think Pixis is just gonna call a draw."

"Doesn't *anyone* think I'm gonna win?" Jean demanded.

"If you won, it wouldn't be you, anyways," Levi said. Jean withered in his seat, and Eren snickered.

"Sir!" Sasha shouted and began wheeling her platter forwards, Reiner and Connie watching nervously.

She placed the covered platter on the table, light glinting off the polished metal. "Bon appetit!" she said, lifting the cover and stepping back.

"Here it comes!" Armin said.

A cloud of steam poured out from the plate, and Pixis sniffed the air, curious. "Hm?" He lifted his fork and knife as he looked down at the dish.

The veterans and recruits who hadn't been present during the contest leaned forwards in anticipation.

"Whoa!" a cadet cried as the cloud cleared. A thick, even chunk of boar meat lay on the plate in a pool of gleaming juices, the rare, marbled pork shining under the light of the flames, tendrils of steam still rising from the pink flesh and gleaming white bone.

"*Damn!*" Hange gasped. "Okay, I'm sorry—but no *way* is an omelette beating that."

"That," Petra said, "looks delicious. Just straight-up amazing. Heavenly."

"It looks like it'd melt in your mouth." Gunther licked his lips.

"Just looks tasty as fuck," Oluo swallowed thickly.

Mike frowned. "Isn't that just meat, though?" he asked. "What about all those vegetables from earlier?"

"No clue." Connie shrugged. "But when she wheeled out, it looked and smelled too good for us to complain." Reiner muttered and agreement, nodding his head.

"Meat!" Another cadet cried.

"She's served meat!"

"What kind of meat is it?" someone else asked.

"Didn't they see the big-ass boar?" Levi asked.

"It was a free day," Armin said. "They were probably spending their time doing other things."

"Man, that looks delicious!" Jean was beginning to look nervous, frowning, sweat trailing down his cheek. He tensed his shoulders, and Armin made a small, concerned noise.

"All right. . ." Pixis pressed his knife onto the meat and began dragging it back and forth. He held up the chunk of meat he'd cut off and raised it to his mouth. Sasha's team watched, shoulders tense, worrying their lips.

"Look at that cut!" Hange was all but salivating onto the carpet. "It's so tender!"

"You wouldn't have happened to save any of that, did you?" Mike asked hopefully.

"For a year?" Sasha shook her head. "No. Sorry, sir." Mike sighed. "But give me a bow and arrow, and an hour in the woods, and I can probably—no, definitely—whip up something just as good!"

Mike's expression brightened, mustache twitching in anticipation. "I'm holding you to that, rookie."

Sounds of chewing were heard as Pixis ate the meat. His eyes suddenly widened with a small choke, and orange light flashed around him.

"Huh?" Eren frowned. "Hey, did anyone else think that that looked like—"

"A Titan transformation?" Armin supplied, nodding. "Yeah."

"What do you think's going to happen?" Krista asked.

"We were there, remember?" Ymir said. "Nothing happened. He just stared into space and then ate the rest of it."

Anka raised a hand, eyes wide with worry, as his mustache began twitching, jaw quivering. Gustav took a step back as the stage began shaking. "Commander!"

"What?" Moblit cried. "An earthquake?"

"I do *not* remember that!" Connie pointed at the screen. "Does anyone remember that?" Mumbles of 'no', and shaking heads answered his question.

"Whoa!" Shouts of alarm rose from the crowd of cadets as the earth trembled, flames sputtering wildly as the braziers shook, rocking from one leg to the other.

"This is nuts!" Hange said. "An alternate timeline?"

"I doubt it," Erwin frowned. "Maybe it's another exaggeration?"

"Commander," Jean said. "I can assure you: whatever's happening on screen *never* happened in real life—not even the slightest."

"What's happening?!" someone shouted.

"I, too, would like to know the answer to that!"

Cracks shot across the stage, tearing the carpet apart, chunks of the floor flying out from the force of the shaking. Pixis's eyes were dark as waves of force rose around him, shards of wood from the stage surrounding him. "It's. . . it's. . ." Suddenly, his eyes flared a glowing red, and, for a moment, everything stopped: the dust rising from the destroyed stage slowed, and the splintered wood froze in the air.

"It's. . ?" Marco prompted, everybody still tense and on edge, confused about what was happening on screen.

"It's delicious!" Pixis was propelled from his seat like a rocket, leaving a trail of burning dust in his wake as the stage exploded, engulfing the shocked soldiers and cadets alike.

"Oh!" Armin said. "I get it!" The others looked at him imploringly. "This must be what Pixis was thinking when he ate the meat!" he said.

"I see," Erwin said. "So the TV has translated Pixis's feeling into a visual form, so that it's easier for us to follow along."

The sky around Pixis vanished into blurs of blue and green light as he continued to roar, eyes wild from the taste. He whirled in the air, shooting off above the Walls and over

the District. "This is boar meat!" he roared, pulling out his swords and spiraling between two Titans, dodging the fingers of one as it reached for him. "Succulent boar meat!" He somersaulted over another Titan's hand and whipped around, slicing through the napes of the other two. Oversaturated, brilliant red burst free as Pixis shot forwards.

"Jeez!" Jean blinked, feeling like the bright colours on screen were searing his eyes.

"This is insane!" Connie said.

"If this is how he felt eating Sasha's meat, then how do you think he felt when he ate Jean's?" Mikasa asked.

"Oh, yeah," Hange grinned. "This is definitely the best episode, so far!"

"It's awe-inspiring!" He twisted in the air, cutting through another Titan's nape. "The texture is magnificent!" He did a backflip in the air, slicing the last Titan's hand to shreds. "The more I chew, the tastier it gets!" He rose higher, vanishing into the light of the moon in a flash of light that engulfed the screen.

"Sasha!" Hange laughed. "Your meat sent him skywards!" They chuckled. "Come on. This *has* to win."

"Hm. . ." Mike narrowed his eyes. "I'm starting to think you might be right, Hange."

"Come on!" Jean lamented as his friends laughed. "Have a little faith, will you?"

Pixis, now taller than the Walls, landed on the ground with a thundering crash, massive feet crushing two houses. He reached into his jacket and pulled out a flask the size of a large house, taking a deep drink.

"Sina's tits!" Connie cried.

"The Colossal Boar turned him into a Colossal Pixis!" Eren joked.

"He's gotta be bigger than the Colossal Titan!" Bertolt flinched at Gunther's yell. Annie glanced at him, and Reiner kept his gaze focused on the TV. The boy took a deep breath and turned his attention back to the show.

He gasped as he lowered it, staggering before letting out a high-pitched crow.

"What was that?" Petra giggled.

"His feelings, remember?" Eld said.

"The wine masks the pungency of the beast," he yelled, running forwards. "And all that remains is the sweetness of the meat!"

"When did he become a food critic?" Jean asked.

Sasha shrugged. "Since getting drunk on top of the Wall, I guess?"

Mikasa, Jean, Armin, Krista, and Connie stood on rooftops in full uniform and ODM gear, watching as he rampaged through the town.

"What are you guys doing in his. . . food hallucination? Foodgasm?" Eren asked.

"First of all, I have no idea," Jean said. "And, second of all, never say that again."

"Leave this to us!" Connie yelled as all five of them raised their hands to their mouths. Yellow lightning crackled as they bit down together and blood flew through the air.

“Sweet mother of Titans!” Mike yelled.

“You’re Shifters!” Petra cried.

“But—” Moblit looked flabbergasted. “How come he knew about the Shifters? I thought this was before the Battle of Trost—?”

“Shh!” Hange waved their hands at him. “Don’t question it! It’s funny!”

“But—”

“Just shut it, Berner,” Levi said. “How often does four-eyes shut their piehole about Titans?” That got the XO to be quiet.

The houses they were standing on exploded as Titan forms wrapped around them: Mikasa’s Titan towered over them all, packed with bulging, rippling muscles, crouched on the ground, eyes glowing purple; Jean’s long-limbed form opened its mouth, the action only elongating his already ridiculously exaggerated, horse-like face, tiny, wide-set eyes, peering up at the sky; Armin’s form was no better, with the only resemblance to his human being the haircut—his body was almost half the size of his head, which, itself, had the features of what he could possibly look like in thirty years, though certainly not now; Krista’s was the most human out of all of them, hair flying through the air, entire body glowing glowing with a radiant light, white-feathered angel wings spread out behind her, abs and chest in full display. Connie, on the other hand was barely visible; while the others had Titans to rival Pixis, who was only slightly taller than the Colossal, he couldn’t have been bigger than thirteen metres, arms and legs flailing as he was tossed through the air from the force of the others’ transformations.

Laughter exploded throughout the room. The people who had just ‘turned’ into Titans looked torn between being uncomfortable and amused, and Eren was looking slightly put out.

“How come Mikasa’s Titan’s got more muscles than mine?” he demanded, pouting. “Come on! She’s like. . . like. . . an un-armoured Armoured Titan!” The laughter got louder, and Reiner flinched, but even he had to admit it was true—in fact, as much as it pained (and terrified) him to say, Mikasa’s Titan could probably steamroll the Armoured, and, quite possibly, even the Colossal.

“Look at Jean and Armin!” Sasha giggled. “Are they even Shifters? They don’t look special at all!”

Marco chuckled. “If I didn’t know any better, I’d have thought they were just Abnormals.”

“Rude!” Jean yelled as Armin flushed. Marco raised his hands in surrender, smiling.

Eren rolled his eyes. “*Connie*, though!” He let out a snort of laughter. “I mean—yeah, normally, you’d be a pretty big Titan, but the others are bigger than the Walls!” Connie grinned, and showed him a choice finger, raised in its full glory.

“Is nobody,” Ymir said, “going to acknowledge the fact that Krista is a literal *angel?*”

“Do we even need to?” Sasha challenged. “I mean, we all already knew it, didn’t we?” Krista flushed, burying her face in her arms.

“Bro!” Connie’s eyes suddenly widened. “Dude! Krista’s Titan—” His eyes were wide, face suddenly red.

“What?” Petra asked. “What is—” She was cut off by Krista as she made a horrified, gasping sound.

“It’s got *tits!*” Jean squawked, then slammed his hands over his mouth, face red.

“And a four-pack,” Mikasa helpfully pointed out. Krista groaned, bemoaning the loss of her privacy into her hands as Ymir tried to laugh, pat her on the back, and ogle, all at once.

Krista’s eyes opened and glowed a brilliant purple that flashed to white as her hair was blown back. The light of the rainbow blinded Pixis, who shouted, raising an arm to block his eyes. He screamed as the force of the brilliance threw him through the air. *Up until now*, he thought, the whites of his eyes turned to the sky, the world shaking around him. *I’ve never*. . .

“This thing just keeps getting weirder and weirder,” Jean said, shaking his head.

Pixis floated in outer space over the cratered surface of the moon, the top of the Earth peeking over the curve of the moon.

“Is that the *moon?!*” Armin sat up straight, eyes wide.

“Holy *shit!*” Hange gasped, jumping to their feet (very nearly knocking the top of their head against Mike’s chin). “Tha—” they pointed at the screen and whirled around to face the rest of the viewers. “That’s the Earth!” they screeched. “That’s us! That’s *us!*”

“No *way*.” Eren’s eyes were wide. “Wait—is this real? Or just part of his foodga—feelings?”

Hange let out a sudden screech, grabbing their hair and dropping to their knees. “The ending!” they shrieked. “There were round stars and planets in the ending, too!” They grabbed their notebook and landed on their stomach (narrowly avoiding a nasty collision between their chin and the coffee table), scribbling frantically in their notebook. “The earth is *round!*”

“No fucking way!” Jean yelled as the trio in the back exchanged alarmed looks.

“Moblit!” Hange yelled. “Quick, draw it, draw it, draw it!”

Tasted wine.* . . Space debris floated around him as he drifted upwards in starry atmosphere, the light of the sun blinding, save for the dark silhouette that was Earth. *This good!

“Huh?” Sasha sat up straight, ignoring Hange’s continued screaming. “Wine?”

“But he ate the meat, didn’t he?” Connie said, confused.

“Just accept it,” Mike said.

“He can be eccen—er, strange, when he’s drunk,” Erwin said. “That’s probably the most coherent thought you’re getting out of him.”

Pixis stared into space, eyes larger than the planets he'd just floated by. "The Commander isn't moving," a cadet below the stage whispered as Anka and Gustav stood behind Pixis, arms raised, sweat pooling on their faces.

"Huh," Eren said, slightly disappointed. "So it was just his feelings."

"You didn't *actually* think he took out four Titans and shot into space, did you?" Ymir sneered.

"Well, it would've been cool. . ."

Sasha, Reiner, and Connie watched, triumphant smiles on their faces. "Look!" Connie grinned. "He's paralyzed with delight!"

"Damn right he is," Gunther said. "In person, at least."

"You do *not* want to look inside his head right now," Eld agreed, shaking his own.

"I've got a headache," Oluo announced. "And I'm dizzy. And my eyes hurt."

"Same, man. Same. . ."

Reiner clenched his fists, smile spreading across his face. "The contest's ours," he declared.

"That's what you think," Jean said quietly. Sasha stuck her tongue out at him.

"It's your turn now!" Sasha shouted, grin wider than the Walls. "Jean!"

Annie turned to look at Jean and Armin exchanged a glance and nodded at each other.

"Hey!" Gunther said suddenly. "Your crutches are gone, Armin!"

Eld blinked. "They are!" he said.

"Wow," Mike said. "I know you said that they healed quickly, but. . ." He shook his head.

"You sure you're not *really* at Titan Shifter, Armin?" Hange joked, grinning.

"No!" Armin put his hands up in front of him. "Turned out it was just a minor sprain." He grinned sheepishly. "Not even that, really. . . just us overreacting."

"Yeah, we got that," Eren said teasingly.

"You sure?" Hange grinned. "I'd love another subject to compare results on. . ." They trailed off and began humming. In the back of the room, Bertolt looked paralyzed with fear.

Jean turned to look forwards and steeled himself, shoulders tightening as he pushed his cart forwards. Pixis, still staring ahead blearily, turned at the sound of Jean's wheels turning. He watched, lips slightly downturned, as Jean placed his plate in front of him. "Bon appetit," he said, reaching forwards and lifting the cover.

"Copycat," Sasha sniffed.

"It's a saying!"

"Hm?" Pixis's eyebrows raised as he looked down at the omelette on the plate, the messy blob of tomato sauce on top sliding half-onto the plate.

"I don't see any stars flying around. . ." Hange said.

“What?!” Sasha and Connie’s heads jerked forwards in semblance to pigeons, Sasha’s eyes wide in alarm, Connie’s jaw hanging slightly open, eyebrows raised, eyes staring blankly at the meal.

“Presentation is seriously lacking,” Mike said.

“I don’t get it,” Oluo said. “You spent all night doing. . . what? It took the same amount of time it took Sasha to make a perfect chop for you to heat up an already-made meal.”

“Sorry, Jean, but I seriously don’t see any way for you to win this,” Petra said apologetically. Connie coughed into his fist, and Sasha sniffed.

“What is that?” someone in the crowd.

“An omelette?” Another cadet craned his neck.

“He’s trying to win with an omelette?”

“Well,” Pixis smiled as he looked down at the omelette. “Isn’t this a cute little thing?”

“Well, that’s better than him laughing at it,” Armin said.

“He might as well be, though,” Jean huffed.

Jean stood up straight, Armin and Annie watching in the background. “Please,” he said. “Have a taste.”

“Hm. . .” Pixis tilted his chin slightly and pressed his knife into the omelette, dragging it back and forth as he began to cut. Dramatic music began playing as the image took on a darker hue. Armin and Annie stood in the wings, watching as Pixis raised the corner of the omelette to his mouth. Jean’s expression was tense as he watched, Anka, Gustav, and Shadis standing at parade rest as the camera drew back and the image faded away.

“Huh?” Hange sat up straight, furrowing their brow in confusion. “No imagery this time?”

“So. . . he didn’t feel anything?” Jean looked simultaneously shocked and disappointed. Sasha and Connie were staring at the screen, jaws nearly touching the floor.

Pixis let out a satisfied sigh as a chorus of string quartets dragged out a low, sonorous tune, placing his fork and knife on the empty plate. He dabbed at his lips with his napkin while the soldiers watched, tense.

“What?!” Jean threw his hands into the air. “Just. . . what?!”

“I am *so* confused,” Connie said, rubbing his bald skull.

“The Commander isn’t saying anything,” Connie said.

“That means Sasha wins, right?” Hange asked.

“It *should*,” Sasha said.

“That means victory is ours!” Despite the self-assured voices, all three of them were in tensed-up, battle-ready positions.

“Yes,” Sasha grinned. “There’s nothing in the whole, wide world that tastes better than meat!”

"So Sasha wins, right?"

Levi kicked Hange's lower back lightly. "They're about to tell us!"

Pixis's chair scraped against the floor as he stood up, placing his hands on the table as he pushed it back. "And, now," he said. "My decision." The camera drew back over the countless heads of the watching cadets. "The winner of this contest. . ." Both teams watched as he took a dramatic pause: Jean's, determined despite their nerves, and Sasha's, self-assured smirks plastered all over their faces.

"Just fucking say it!" Oluo yelled. Petra smacked his ear.

Pixis's cheeks were red from liquor as he stared out over the cadets. "Is Jean Kirschtein!"

"Uh—!" Connie, Sasha, and Reiner's jaws dropped as they stared in horror.

The veterans wore similar expressions.

"What?!" Hange's mouth hung open as they stared. "But—what? How?!"

Levi leaned forwards, snapping their jaw shut. "You're catching flies, shitty glasses."

"But Sasha's meat—!" Eren blinked. "That whole 'feelings' thing!"

"Maybe Jean's omelette was so good it startled his senses?" Petra suggested, dumbfounded.

"No way!" Sasha said. "That's not how omelettes work!"

"Maybe it's like Mike said," Moblit said. "Pixis *is* drunk, after all—"

"He's *always* drunk!"

"Yes, but he was drunk the whole time!"

Screams rang through the air as the cadets began cheering, jumping up and down and throwing their fists above their heads.

"Jean won!" a cadet cried.

"The omelette trounced the meat!"

"Aren't those the same guys as earlier in the episode?" Mike asked.

"And they're in the exact same positions." Eld shuddered. "Creepy."

"It's a victory for home-cooked meals!" Jean stared a Pixis, mouth open, corners of his lips curled in the beginnings of a smile.

"You didn't even cook it!" Sasha wailed, putting her face in her hands. "Such wonderful meat, wasted!" she lamented.

Jean started as a hand landed on his shoulder and he turned around. Armin gave him a thumbs-up, grinning, Annie standing behind him, arms crossed, eyes closed in quiet approval.

"You guys were there while he heated it up," Mike said. "Didn't you notice that he didn't do any cooking?"

"Well—" Armin turned around to glance at Annie, who'd been staring at her hands, lost in thought, not paying attention. "Neither of us really knew anything about cooking, so. . ."

Sasha ran up to the stage, slamming her hands down on the table. "I cannot accept this!" she protested over the victorious music. "Why?!" she demanded as the cadets stopped cheering to listen. "Why did the meat lose?!"

"I'd like the answer to that, too!"

Pixis lowered his head to look her in the eyes, wrinkled cheeks flushed the colour of a tomato. "Listen, rookie. . ." he said. "What exactly *is* meat?!"

"Meat is meat!" Sasha cried, raising her fists to her chest.

"Maybe if you'd put other stuff on the plate?" Moblit suggested. "Like. . . well, I don't know. A carrot?"

"Just keep watching," Connie said.

Silence fell as the orchestra came to an abrupt decrescendo and halt, and Pixis raised his head with a small hum. "Hmm. . ." Sasha blinked, looking up at him. "Exactly." Pixis's eyes were hazy and unfocused.

"He's *still* drunk!" Reiner suddenly exclaimed. Bertolt and Annie whipped around to look at him—Bertolt, alarmed, and Annie glaring.

"His liver's gotta be a hunk of shit by now," Levi muttered. *Well, not that I'm much better. But, still*.

"Meat is meat." The image faded, showing the sky over the Wall slowly turning a light blue as the sun rose over it, shining down on the forest below. "It is nothing more, nothing less. Meat is simply. . . meat."

"Uh. . ." Gunther blinked. "What?"

Rays of sunlight beamed down onto the compound as Pixis continued talking. "That is why. . . you lost."

"Hold up!" Mike said. "Were you guys up *all night?*"

"Well, yeah," Jean said.

"Jeez." Mike ran a hand through his hair. "You guys were—what? Fourteen? You completed a Titan-hunting training exercise, went hunting, demolished half a forest, *and* did a cook-off, all in less than twenty-four hours? How were you all still standing?"

"Mike," Hange chastised. "They're teenagers! Everyone knows that they don't have proper sleep schedules—they would've been awake, anyways!"

Sasha's eyes widened with a gasp, glistening as tears rand down her cheeks. She let out a sob, collapsing to her knees and grabbing the edge of the table as Reiner and Connie watched on in shock. "I was such a fool!" she wailed, pressing her forehead to the covered table.

"You actually took that as an explanation?" Eren asked.

"Of course!" She blinked. "It made sense! Didn't it?"

"None of the hunting stuff you talked about in this episode made sense," Ymir grumbled.

“You accepted that guff as an explanation?” Reiner sked, dumbfounded.

“My thoughts exactly!” Oluo pointed at the blond on screen.

Pixis stared dreamily up at the sky in a drunken haze. “I completely overlooked the potatoes and carrots I’ve relied upon ‘til now!” Sasha continued sobbing into the pristine tablecloth, tears staining the fabric. “I tried to win by simply roasting meat!” she screamed, voice hoarse.

Moblit blinked, surprised at having his own suggestion appear on screen.

“Now, that, there, actually does make some sense,” Mike said. “I wouldn’t be feeling the greatest if someone made me a eat a hunk of meat with nothing to buffer it, either.”

A hand reached out towards her. “There’s no need to be embarrassed.” Sasha looked up, surprised, at Jean’s voice.

“Oh!” Hange’s eyes widened in realization. “So that’s why you’re both still friends!”

A voice began singing a caling tune in the background. “*Die sehr weite grüne Erde*.” Jean smiled, rays of sunlight shining down on him, as he spoke. “You aren’t the only one,” he said. “Who just roasted their dish.”

“So you admit it!” Sasha crossed her arms, indignant.

“Oh, come on!” Jean said. “It was a year ago! Why are you getting so worked up about it now?”

“‘Cause we just *watched* it!”

“*Das reiche schöne Wasser*.” Sasha looked up with a gasping sob, lips quivering, tears still streaked across her face. “I’m sorry, Jean,” she whispered, beams of light making her wet eyes shine. She reached forwards and they clapped their hands together.

“Aw,” Petra smiled.

Jean chuckled, gripping onto her’s and pulling her up. “It’s fine,” he said. A warm glow overtook the image as it faded away.

“A perfect ending to a weird-ass story,” Hange declared, nodding.

“*Die grandiose Natur sorgt immer noch für ihre Kinder*. . .” The song carried on into the next scene as Pixis, Anka, and Gustav walked down a hall, later in the morning.

“Oh, there’s more?” Eren asked, surprised.

“I thought the last scene would be the ending,” Armin agreed.

“Maybe we’ll get more explanation about why Pixis chose the omelette,” Eld said.

“When you eat late at night like that,” Pixis commented. “It leaves you feeling bloated.” He smiled, cheeks still rosy. “Though, something about that omelette. . .” He sighed.

Almost everybody, even those who weren’t as interested in the story, leaned forwards.

“Taste aside, it was perfect as a late-night snack.”

Around the rooms, jaws hit the floor.

“What?!” Jean had a look of shocked offense stamped on his face.

“Excuse me?!” Sasha’s face was nearly identical.

“So he *didn’t* think it tasted good?” Mike looked confused. “He just chose it ‘cause it was lighter than the meat?”

“Well.” Levi blinked. “Looks like you were right, Sniffy. He did just end up fucking with them.”

“No!” Sasha yelled, and half the room nearly jumped out of their skins. “No, no, no!” She leapt to her feet. “This is ridiculous!” she cried. “I demand a rematch! And!” She pointed at Jean. “This time, you will *not* be getting help from your mother!”

“Fine!” Jean jumped to his feet as well. “I’ll show you, Potato Girl! Just wait ‘til you get one-upped—for *real*, this time!”

“Fine!” Sasha pointed across the room. “We’ll do it right here—in a completely different world! No cheating, this time!”

“Done!” The other people in the room looked back and forth between them. “We’ll have a *real* food match this—”

“You most certainly will not,” Erwin said, and both recruits turned to look at him, surprised. “I know it’s hard to remember,” he said. “But we aren’t her for enjoyment. Remember,” he continued. “This isn’t for fun, or personal gain. We’re here to learn about the future of our world—and how to *save* it.”

“Bu—"

“Of course.” Jean interrupted Sasha, turning and saluted Erwin. “Apologies, Commander!”

Sasha sighed, but saluted Erwin nonetheless. “Sorry, sir!”

“Alright,” Erwin nodded. “Provided we have free time later, you may use the kitchen, but I don’t want to hear about *any* competions, do you understand?”

“Sir!”

“*Hoffentlich können*. . .” Jean stood with Sasha’s team on the steps of the compound as Sasha wiped her eyes, Reiner and Connie standing behind her, smiling, Reiner’s arms crossed, and Connie’s hands on his hips. “*Wir es irgendwann verstehen*.” Sasha looked up with a small smile as Jean turned, looking down the path. *Maybe I’ll go drop by my home tomorrow*, he thought, smiling.

“Hooray!” Hange punched the air. “He’s growing up!”

“*Wir gehen zur anderen Seite des Horizontes*.” Jean’s mother sat at a table in her living room, the empty basket used to deliver the omelette on the ground by her feet, stitching at a scrap of green fabric in her lap, a roll of the same green fabric on the table next to a jug and pair of sewing scissors, a basket of apples on the other side of the table. She looked up with a smile as the image faded away.

Sunlight shone through the windows of the barracks onto Jean's bunk, where his mother's note lay, neatly unfolded and resting beneath a shiny, red apple.

"So," Ymir reached up and snagged an apple slice from the plate in Armin's lap as the ending began playing. "This episode was for us to get to know each other better, right?" She popped the fruit into her mouth. "What did we learn, kids?"

"Jean can't cook!" Connie called. Jean bounced a pistachio shell of the side of his head.

"You better pick that up," Levi said without looking around. Jean jumped, leaning down and fumbling in the carpet.

"Well, we saw some great personal growth with Jean," Moblit suggested. "That's something, isn't it?"

"We finally had an episode without Eren whining about some dumb shit," Ymir suggested. Eren flipped her off, and she repaid the favour.

Erwin sighed, and Mike chuckled. "Honestly, I think that was just meant to get us to loosen up," Moblit said.

"Most likely," Erwin agreed.

"Hey, who knows," Hange said as the first scene of the next episode appeared on screen. "Maybe the next one will be more interesting!"

"Well, then," Ymir said. "What are we waiting for?"

OVA – 3.5. Ilse's Notebook: Memoirs of a Scouting Legion Soldier

Tense, electronic music played as Eren, Armin, and Mikasa were shown standing with countless other Marians, watching in muted horror as the Colossal Titan loomed over the Wall, grip crushing the stone over the Gate. "*In the year 845*," the narrator said, "*due to the sudden appearance of the Colossal and Armoured Titan*. . ."

"Why this again?" Jean asked. "I mean, haven't we seen it. . . what? In, like, every single episode?"

"Yeah." Sasha nodded. "I mean, at this point, it's just unnecessary recap."

"Maybe because it's an OVA," Armin suggested. "People on the Homepage probably don't watch it at the same time as the main episodes."

Scenes of destruction from the Fall of Wall Maria flashed on screen: the Gate being blown apart from the force of the Colossal's kick, the rush of air and steam tearing buildings to shreds and sending people flying, flapping in the air like paper dolls; the Armoured, smashing through the Wall, rubble falling to the earth around it, glowing eyes cold as the world burned around it.

Bertolt winced, and Reiner pursed his lips, frowning.

"*Our daily lives crumbled with the Wall*." Leagues of Mindless Titans streamed towards the Wall, and Carla's limp form was shown, held up to the Smiling Titan's mouth.

"*Stop!*" Eren screamed as the Titan's yellowed teeth bit down, blood spraying through the air in ribbons and specks of red.

Eren closed his eyes for a brief moment, gathering himself. *What's the point?* he wondered bitterly. He'd already seen it enough times for it to no longer upset him as much as it once had—and, *hell*, was that a depressing thought—but the fact that it was being shown over and over again was even more infuriating than the initial action.

"*Humanity abandoned Wall Maria*. . ." the narrator said, and a 3D diagram of the three Walls appeared on screen, Titans, silhouetted in red, swarming around them in the barren wasteland. "*Lost 20% of its population, and a third of its territory*. . ." The area within Wall Maria flashed red before the Wall vanished, and more Titans appeared in the area where humans had once thrived. "*And were confined behind Wall Rose in one moment*." Hannes stood atop a roof, swords out, as Titans marched through the hole in the Wall.

"I think you're right," Hange told Armin. "I'm guessing it's something akin to a review for the people on the Homepage."

Marco nodded. "It's called a 'recap'," he told them. "Most of the time, OVAs are released after the initial season is finished."

"So they write parts of the story *after* the time's already passed?" Jean frowned.

"That's so weird," Sasha muttered.

The Survey Corps' flag rippled in an unseen wind, blue and white wings flapping as the banner danced. "*However, humanity had not lost to the Titans just yet*." A group of Scouts let out a battle cry, raising their swords in the air as the camera panned over Trost.

"That's the group that went to Wall Maria, isn't it?" Krista asked. Armin bit his lip.

Pits of spikes had been dug in front of Wall Rose's Gate, a simple, wooden bridge the only thing connecting the town's streets and the Wall, and heavy wooden walls had been erected in a half-moon around the pits. "*The Garrison was tasked with guarding the Walls*." Rows of cannons were shown, polished barrels gleaming in the sunlight.

"That's. . . actually a surprisingly good setup," Eren said. "For the Garrison, at least."

Eld nodded. "They may not be the best soldiers," he said. "But they've got some of the best engineers inside the Walls."

"Hence the reason why a lot of weapons manufacturing work goes to them," Mike added.

They're right, Armin thought, looking over the image with a critical eyes. *The pits are the most obvious line of defense, but they're also one of the most effective; Titans might look like humans, but they haven't nearly the same cognitive abilities. The bridge is suitable for humans, but it could be easily be crushed by a horde of Titans—even small ones. If worse came to worse,*

it could also be easily destroyed by humans. The wooden walls are a good touch, too: the area around the gate is pretty sparse, and the structures give the soldiers more room to swing around.

"*And young recruits were being trained in techniques and knowledge to fight the Titans.*" A quick montage of the recruits' training days were shown: Eren, standing with the other members of the 104th in the yard of the compound; the cadets mock-fighting with heavy wooden spears; Jean grappling with another boy, teeth grit, forehead shiny with sweat.

"That's reused footage from the last episode, right?" Eren said.

Hange nodded. "Must be that recap thing, again," they said.

"Around that time. . ."

***Year 850*.**

The camera panned over Trost, clouds drifting lazily through the sunny sky.

Mikasa bit her lip at the sight of the houses and farmland around the outside of the Wall. *Just how many people did we have to leave behind?* she wondered. We *got out, but what about the others?*

"*The elite soldiers of the Scouting Legion were attempting to, once again, set foot in the territory of the Titans via Trost District.*" The Scouts were lined up in the street, Erwin's white horse at the front of the row, mere feet from the Gate, Levi, Hange, and Mike directly behind him. The snowy white mare shook her head, ashy-grey mane shaking as she let out a small whinny.

"That's a beautiful horse, Commander!" Sasha said.

Erwin smiled faintly. "Thank you," he said. "She's the best steed I've ever had."

The bell swung back and forth, the rounded end of the tongue striking the dome sharply as the tolling rang through the air. "Thirty seconds until the Gates are opened!" Erwin shouted. "All personnel, prepare to depart!"

"Do you get nervous when you leave the Walls?" Sasha asked. "Or are you just used to it by now?"

The veterans glanced at each other, and Mike shrugged. "Well," Erwin replied. "It realy depends on what you mean by 'nervous', doesn't it?"

"Are we used to it?" Moblit nodded. "Definitely."

"If, by nervous, you mean we're scared of being killed," Mike said. "Then that's a definite yes."

"We've all done this dozens of times," Levi said. "But that doesn't mean we don't run the risk of ending up down some fat Titan's gullet."

“It’s just more normal for us, now,” Hange noted, tilting their head a little. “I mean—it’s just a part of our lives, ya know? We’re doing our jobs. Dying’s a risk every Scout runs. It might be lower for some, but it’s always there.”

“That’s kind of sad,” Krista said quietly. “That we live in a world where, for some people, dying is just a part of their lives.”

Erwin smiled dryly. “Well, when you put it like that, I guess it’s true, isn’t it?” he commented.

In more ways than one, Annie thought, nails digging into her palms.

“Jeez. . .” Garrison soldiers lined the streets, facing the Scouts, arms behind their back in parade rest. “I’m tired of waiting,” Hange complained, dropping their reins and leaning back, face turned to the sky. “Hey, Levi—” they turned to the dark-haired man, pouting.

“No,” Levi interrupted, glaring ahead.

“Wow,” Jean chuckled. “Harsh.”

Petra frowned at the screen, looking at the dark circles under his eyes, like layers of smudged eyeliner. *It looks like he hasn’t slept for weeks*.

“I haven’t even said anything yet,” Hange protested, gripping their reins.

“I think I remember this Expedition,” Hange said suddenly. “Wasn’t it that one. . ?” They trailed off, frowning. “Uh. . . that one. . .”

“Like you’d be able to tell from the conversation,” Levi said. “It’s the same one every time.”

“You want me to help capture a Titan with you, right?” Levi asked, still not looking at them. “That’s a waste of effort. I’ll have no part in it.”

“But they did end up catching some Titans, right?” Jean asked. “I remember that we were all interrogated for that.” Armin glanced over his shoulder, gaze flicking from Jean to Marco, then to Annie. The blonde girl noticed his look and raised an eyebrow, gaze cold. Armin shrugged, then turned back to the screen.

“Oh, yeah,” Eren said. “Sawney and Bean, right?”

Hange let out a loud, audible sniff at the reminder of their lost babies, and Levi rolled his eyes. “Oh, for Walls’ sake,” he grumbled.

Hange stared at him for a second before turning to their left, facing Mike. “What about you, Mike?” they asked. “Want to give it a go?” The blonde scoffed, a small smile tugging at the corners of his lips as he looked away.

“You guys act like they’ve asked this question before,” Connie said.

“Oh, they have,” Mike chuckled.

“Over, and over, and fucking over again,” Levi said.

Hange let out a small, huffing sigh, turning to face the front again, grinning easily. “The same, old, boring answer from the same, old, boring men.”

“Ouch,” Sasha giggled as Hange received a light kick in the ribs.

The gears in the Gate tower began turning and the Gate itself was raised, dirt crumbling from the spikes on the bottom as the soldiers stared ahead, expressions shadowed.

"Oh, Mother of Titans," Jean said. "No offense, Squad Leader Hange, but your expression is terrifying."

Krista glanced at the redhead's wide, manic smile, tilted head, and the brilliant light flashing off the lenses of their goggles, and shivered. "Scary," she whispered.

"Wuss," Ymir whispered in her ear, chuckling as Krista glared at her, cheeks bright.

The Gate settled with a dull *clang*, and Erwin looked up, eyes set. "The 49th Expedition Beyond the Walls begins now!" he yelled. A battle fanfare began playing as his horse reared on her hind legs, kicking the air and whinnying. "Forward!"

Hange's loud, half-shriek, half-gasp drowned out the sound of the episode. "Oh!" They jumped to their feet (Mike swore as he threw himself against the back of the couch, narrowly avoiding a painful collision between his chin and the top of Hange's head). "It's *this* one!"

"What happens during this one?" Connie asked.

"Something, obviously," Jean said. "Otherwise, why would there be an episode?"

"*Ooh!*" Hange shook their fists excitedly in front of them as they hopped up and down, bouncing on the balls of their feet. "I can't wait, I can't wait, I can't *wait!*"

"I can," Oluo muttered. Gunther snorted into his glass of apple juice, and Petra began giggling.

"What?" Sasha asked. "What happens."

"They—" Moblit began, but was silenced as Hange slapped a hand over their mouth.

"Hush, Moblit!" They grinned. "I wanna see their reactions!"

"Well, now I'm scared," Jean muttered.

Hooves thundered as the Scouts rode into Wall Maria, past dilapidated buildings, kicking up dust on the abandoned roads. "Yahoo!" Erwin looked up with a start as Hange galloped past him, their horse weaving a twisted, wiggling path as they rocketed forwards.

"Hange!" Erwin yelled.

A few people laughed at Hange's blatant disobedience, and Erwin's failed attempt at reigning them in. "A for effort, Commander," Ymir snorted.

"Isn't that dangerous, though?" Krista asked. "I mean—they *are* in the Titans' territory."

"It's barely a few metres from the Wall," Mike said. "As long as they don't wander too far, it's fine."

"It is *not* fine," Erwin and Moblit said at the same time: Erwin, sharply, and Moblit, quiet and nervously.

"All you Titans out there," Hange crowed, cheeks pink, eyes shining behind their glasses. "I'm on my way to meet you!"

They've got a few screws loose, Jean thought, wrinkling his nose. *Who the hell would* want *to meet a Titan?*

At the front of the room, Levi had leaned down, nudging Hange's shoulder. "Hey," he said. "If it's *this* episode—"

Hange nodded, cheeks flushed with excitement. "Oh, I can't *wait* to—"

"Yeah, we know, you kept yelling earlier," Levi snapped. "What I was *going* to say—"

"It's the Ymir girl, right?" Erwin said. Levi nodded. "I agree," he said. "It's a small chance, sure, but she's here, isn't she? That means she's important to the story, somehow."

"Do you really think that the 'Ymir' that Titan was talking about's her?" Moblit asked, nodding to the brunette.

"I don't see why not," Levi said. "I mean, at this point, anything's possible, isn't it?"

"Well," Erwin said. "Either way, it looks like we might be getting some answers today."

Hange grinned, shifting their weight. "Oh, I can't *wait*."

Steam rose from the corpses of fallen Titans as the Scouts settled in an abandoned village. A squad of four rode away from a line of black smoke as it traced its way into the sky, another soldier standing on a nearby grassy boulder, looking into the distance through a spyglass, his partner, holding a clipboard, standing next to him. More soldiers were working in an abandoned courtyard: two Scouts ran by, ducking out from behind two wagons, where another duo was unloading supplies; a dark-haired Scout knelt on the ground near them, filling up gas cannisters; a cloaked man stood to the side, counting stacked crates, a clipboard in his left hand, while a blond stroked his horse's back as she drank from a bucket.

I guess there's one benefit about the abandoned towns, Jean thought with a small grimace. *More places for outposts and camps*. A barely-distinguishable silver lining on the pitch black cloud that had been the Colossal Titan's attack.

"Think about it, Erwin!" Two Scouts guarded a blue-and-white tent that had been set up on top of a stone wall, in the garden of a small chateau, a large gas container and stacked cannisters next to it.

Who could have been living there? Eren thought, surprising himself. *A merchant? A noble? Or just a well-off family?* He frowned, pursing his lips. *What must it be like?* he wondered. *Going to all these places every time. What do they find? Tables, still set for meals that they never got to eat? Toys, maybe? Books and clothes? Bodies?* His mouth tightened, a straight line across his face. *How must they feel, knowing that there was a chance, no matter how small, that they could have stopped it all? What goes through their minds when they have to move through these. . . these* ghost towns*?*

For the first time, he felt dread at the idea of re-entering Wall Maria.

Hange slammed their hands down on the table. "I understand that setting up supply bases takes priority," they said as Moblit held his hands up anxiously, sweating bullets as he

tried, in vain, to coax Hange away from the table. "But uncovering the true nature of the Titans has always been our true objective!" They leaned forwards as they spoke, voice rising. "I'm sure you're aware of that!"

"Maybe you *shouldn't* yell at the Commander?" Armin suggested quietly, voice rising into a squeak at the end.

"Squad Leader. . ." Moblit said nervously, hand held up placatingly. "It's probably not a good idea to talk to the Commander in that tone—"

"Shut the hell up!" Hange interrupted, turning to glare at him.

"Rude," Ymir muttered.

Moblit's jaw dropped as they turned back to Erwin. "We need to capture a Titan alive, above anything else!" Outside, Levi sat atop his horse, two other soldiers flanking him, one observing the woods with a spyglass. "I know that it seems impossible. After all, the last time we took one alive was more than fifteen years ago. . ." Yet another soldier with a spyglass stood atop a roof, cloak fluttering in a light breeze while a trio stood on the ground, locked in fierce conversation, seemingly heavily debating the contents of a clipboard the dark-haired man was holding. "And more than twenty people died in order to pull that off."

"Seriously?" Sasha's jaw dropped, aghast.

"That's. . . crazy." Eren shook his head. "Nuts."

"Most of you guys are fifteen, right?" Mike asked. Most of them nodded, and Mike winced. "Son of a bitch, it really took us this long to get this far, didn't it?"

The Scouts on the ground seemed to come to an agreement, and the blond turned, rushing down the street.

"But we cannot get any intel if we are afraid of making sacrifices!" Hange finished, eyes wide and teeth gritted to emphasize their point.

"I agree," Jean said. "But *twenty people*—"

"We developed new methods," Moblit told him. "We haven't lost a single man capturing Titans, yet."

"Funny, isn't it?" Hange chuckled. "We die by the droves trying to *kill* them, but capturing them's easy as pie."

"So," Peer stood by Erwin's side as the Commander spoke, glancing up from his map to talk to a dark-haired soldier. "Pay extra attention to our offense and defense."

A few people snickered. "And he wasn't even listening," Connie snorted. Hange huffed indignantly, crossing their arms.

"Understood." The man nodded and turned, exiting the tent.

Erwin sighed, finally looking at Hange. "Do we really have to go through this again?" he asked. "We don't have the manpower to spare for a capture mission." Hange watched him, lips pursed. "Even getting this far today cost us ten men."

A few of the older Scouts sighed as the younger recruits grimaced and gaped. “Wow,” Sasha muttered. “I mean, I knew that the Scouts lost a lot of people, but. . .”

“It doesn’t even look like it’s been more than three hours,” Jean muttered.

“I know that,” Hange said, leaning forwards. “But—!”

“Hange.” Both Hange and Moblit started, and the former stood up straighter, frowning. “Your proposal is rejected.” He didn’t spare them another glance as he turned and walked out, Peer following him.

“Harsh,” Jean muttered again. *But, if I were in his position, I guess I’d do the same thing.*

“H—” Hange chased after him. “Hey!” They burst out of the tent, holding out a hand, as if they could somehow stop him. “Wait, Erwin!”

“Know when you’re beat,” Ymir muttered. Krista glanced at her in surprise.

“But if they hadn’t,” the blonde said. “Then they wouldn’t have been able to capture those other Titans, right?”

“Still,” Ymir said. “Anyone else would have given up.”

“Shouldn’t we be glad that they didn’t?” Krista said. Ymir shrugged, looking back at the TV.

“Whatever.”

Petra glanced up from where she knelt on the ground, filling up a gas cannister, Oluo standing next to her, arms crossed. “It’s no use, Hange,” the man said, smirking smugly at the officer. “We put our lives on the line just trying to kill those damn things,” he continued, closing his eyes pompously.

“Oh, jeez,” Sasha muttered.

Gunther elbowed the other man in the side. “What’s with that attitude?” he asked.

“For the *last time*.” Petra rolled her eyes. “The Captain *doesn’t* talk like that!”

“I dunno,” Mikasa muttered. “Seems about right to me.”

Eren grimaced at her. “Come on, Mika—”

“No.”

“There’s no way we can take one alive.” He held his hands out, shrugging.

“Urgh—!” Oluo spluttered as Hange’s hands suddenly shot forwards, grabbing Oluo by the collar.

“Well, we all saw that coming, didn’t we?” Armin sighed.

“Think about *this*, Oluo,” Hange breathed, voice low and dark. “Let’s say,” they continued, Moblit and Petra staring in shock, “Levi’s coming, and he’s dead set on killing you. What would you do?” Oluo’s face was beaded with sweat as he stared at them, shaking in his boots. “Can you fight him and survive?”

“No.” Connie shuddered. While most of them had never actually *seen* Levi fight before, they’d all heard the stories, and “Humanity’s Strongest” wasn’t a title just handed off to anybody. Add to the fact that Eren still flinched at the memory of the courthouse beating, and

the rumours they'd heard whispered around the corners of the Survey Corps headquarters. . . well, angering him wasn't something any of them were really aiming to do (except for Mikasa, but that was a completely different story).

"Of course not," Oluo wheezed, airway cut off by their grip. "Hey, I can't breathe—!"

"Want me to tell you how you can win that fight?"

"Run!" Jean yelled, then slapped his hands over his mouth, paling.

"Move outside the Walls," Eren decided. "Safer out there."

"Sit down and accept my fate," Eld chuckled.

"Distract him with a broom!" Hange joked. Levi rolled his eyes.

"Stand on a high surface," Mike grinned.

"They say that like hiding from him's possible," Sasha whispered to Connie. Both of them giggled.

Sweat rolled down Hange's own face, though it didn't seem to be from fear, like Oluo—no, instead, they seemed to be perspiring out of pure excitement. Their auburn eyes were wide, dark, and unfocused as they grinned manically, a drop of sweat falling from the tip of their nose.

"That's. . . terrifying," Connie whispered.

Jean nodded slowly, a chill running down his spine. *Their eyes. . . it's like they've been possessed*. His entire form shuddered. *It's like they're not even there. But, at the same time. . . they are* very *much there*.

Holy shit, Ymir thought blankly. *They're insane*.

"You do your homework." Their goggles flashed as they moved their head, the camera slowly closing in on their eyes. "The place he works, the food he eats. . ." Oluo made small gagging noises as Hange's grip tightened. "His taste in women, the number of times he takes a piss. . ." Their pupils were contracted to the point of being nonexistent, mere dots in their eyes as they spoke. "You find out everything you can about him."

Levi wrinkled his nose. "Stalker," he grumbled. Hange laughed. Levi kicked out at them. "Creeper," he said as they kept dodging his feet. "Psycho. Nutcase."

Oluo's feet twisted on the ground, noises of discomfort squeezing through his teeth. "Once you know him, you can find a weakness that you can exploit." Hange's eyes were bright, almost glowing, directed at his face, but staring into space. "If you don't do that before you fight, you'll die for sure."

"Good advice," Ymir muttered, barely audible. "But you still look like a psycho."

"Hange!" Petra cried, jumping to her feet.

"Squad Leader!" Moblit shouted. "You're going too far!"

"I think they burned that bridge ages ago," Mikasa mumbled.

Hange watched Oluo for a moment, lids lowered, eyes closed. "Hm." They closed their eyes, a small smile tugging at the corner of their mouth, and dropped Oluo. He gasped for air

as he collapsed to the ground, ODM clanking, foaming at the mouth. "Ah," Hange chuckled. "My bad." They turned away, a cheerful grin on their face. "But you get my point, right?" They waved casually over their shoulder as they walked away.

That switch was. . . crazy, Bertolt thought, then glanced at Reiner.

"Squad Leader!" Moblit cried, chasing after them.

"Fuck," Oluo croaked, looking up as he massaged his throat. "They damn near killed me." He scowled, glaring after them as they strolled off. "That bitch is insane," he choked out. "They belong in a nuthouse."

I can't help but agree, Krista thought, biting her lips as Hange made a mock-offended gesture at Oluo. *They're smart, but. . .* She shuddered at the memory of Hange's face. *Are—are they okay?*

Petra sighed, planting her fists on her hips. "You know," she said, frowning down at him. "You're part of the Scouting Legion, so could you do something about that barbaric way of speaking?"

"Huh?" Oluo stared up at her. "Why do *I* get the lecture?"

"Yeah, Petra!" Oluo said. "Why do *I* get the lecture?"

"You're just agreeing with yourself, dumbass," Eld said.

"Petra!" Eld interrupted the spat as he called out, walking up the stone steps. "Are you done with the restocking?"

"Y—yes, Eld, sir! I'm almost done!"

"'Sir'?" Ymir snorted.

"I was new!" Petra flushed. "And he's second-in-command—hey, stop laughing!" She slapped the back of Oluo's head. "You weren't much better!"

The camera panned up the weathered, vine-covered side of the house the tent was stationed by; the glass of the windows were shattered, barely held in place by the panes, and there were gaping holes in the roof and walls, collapsed timbers and tiles piled inside the abandoned house.

Mike stood on the roof, munching on a ration bar as he surveyed the terrain, evidently bored out of his mind. Suddenly, he stiffened, eyes widening as he sniffed the air, once, twice, three times, nostrils twitching.

"What are you doing?" Jean asked, frowning.

"Mike has a great sense of smell," Erwin explained. "He can smell the Titans coming before the rest of us even see them."

"What about Shifters?" Reiner asked. The Squad Leader raised his eyebrows, looking behind him. "Do Titan Shifters have a different smell than normal Titans?" he asked.

Mike tilted his head, contemplating. "Well," he said. "I've only ever smelled one—" Reiner nodded stiffly, "—but, no. I don't think so."

He frowned, turning and hurrying to the other side of the building, bootheels clicking against the roof tiles. The camera panned over the busy courtyard towards a nearby forest.

"Holy Maria!" Connie said. "Those trees are *big!*"

"Oh!" Petra said. "I recognize that place. It's the forest of—"

"Big-ass trees," Levi said. Hange snorted, and Erwin sighed.

"Giant trees," Eld told Eren. "It's the Forest of Giant Trees."

Mike sniffed again as he reached into his pocket and pulling out a flare gun, cocking the trigger.

A crack sounded out in the forest, and a group of squawking birds took flight as a pine tree fell over.

"Uh-oh," Connie said. "Trouble!"

On the ground, Erwin frowned, turning to look. Mike was squatted on the roof, still surrounded by a haze of red smoke from the flare. "There's movement in the forest!" he called.

The camera flashed over the Scouts on the ground, all of them sporting various expressions, from shock to determination. "All personnel, prepare for combat!" Erwin called. He frowned, looking around as soldiers rushed past him, cloaks fluttering.

They sure got ready really quick, Sasha thought, thinking of the soldiers who'd been chatting and tending to their horses and supplies in the courtyard. *Is that what it's like to be a Scout? Ready to jump into battle at any moment?* She wondered what would happen if something struck when they were all asleep.

"Squad Leader, it's too dangerous to go alone!" Erwin started, looking to the side.

A few people chuckled, already used to the brunette's shenanigans, despite most of them only having known them for an hour, and only being a few minutes into the episode.

"Erwin!" Hange shouted, running across the courtyard and leaping onto their horse, grabbing the reins away from a startled Moblit. "I'm going ahead!"

"Woah!" Jean cried. "You practically flew onto that horse!"

Hange grinned, raising one leg and slapping their thigh. "I *never* miss leg day!" they proclaimed proudly.

"We're soldiers, four-eyes," Levi said, rolling his eyes. "*Every* day is leg day."

"Ah—!" Moblit stumbled a few steps after them, arm held out in vain.

"Hange, wait!" Erwin yelled as they galloped past him, thundering towards the forest. "Levi!" He turned to the younger man, already on his horse.

"Does this happen a lot?" Armin asked.

Mike frowned. "No, not that often, really. Normal, even Hange waits for the order before charging."

More than a few eyes turned to the bespectacled soldier. "What can I say?" They shrugged. "Guess I *was* a little annoyed, huh?"

“Tch!” Levi yanked on the reins, digging his heels into the flanks of his coal-black steed. “That moron.” Erwin watched as he rode off after Hange, kicking up a small trail of dust.

“Was he just waiting for Hange to rush off?” Sasha giggled to Connie.

“More like waiting for the Commander’s order,” Connie chuckled back.

The camera zoomed through the forest from Hange’s perspective, jolting up and down with the horse’s movement as it weaved through the bushes and trees.

“That’s an interesting way to show things,” Eld remarked.

Gunther nodded. “It’s a bit strange, though,” he said. “It’s like we’re actually in their head, and seeing things through their eyes.

“I think that’s the point,” Moblit said. “Kind of like stepping into their shoes, but. . . *way* more literally.”

“Oh!” Hange’s made a noise of delight as the bulk of a blonde-haired Titan appeared from behind a tree.

Ymir frowned at the Titan. Krista glanced at her. “You good?” she asked.

“Hm?” Ymir glanced at her. “Oh, yeah.” She nodded at the screen. “It’s just really ugly, is all.”

Hange glanced around Mike’s legs, peering at the girl.

“Found ya!” The Titan turned, standing up as Hange raced by it. “Hey there!” they called. “Nice weather we’re having, huh?”

“Oh, my god,” Jean snorted. Moblit covered his face in horror, and Eren chuckled.

“That’s the Squad Leader for you,” the Shifter joked.

“Frickin’ nutcase,” Reiner muttered.

The Titan was small, amongst Titans—six metres, maybe, give or take—but still loomed over the pine tree Hange trotted happy circles around. Dull, dark blue eyes followed Hange’s movements as the soldier rode deeper into the forest. It let out a grunt as it turned following the brunette.

No doubt about it. Ymir frowned at the screen. *It’s her*. She tapped a finger against her palm anxiously, wetting her lips. *Are they going to show—no, wait*. She took a deep breath, slowly and quietly enough that Krista wouldn’t hear. *It’s a story*, she reasoned. *This—all of it—it’s all just a story. And, if we’re thinking about this like a narrative, then why would* I *be in it, and so early? My name hasn’t even been said yet.* She clenched and unclenched her right hand, calming her nervously fluttering pulse. *Calm down*, she thought. *Calm the fuck down, damnit.*

Hange glanced over their shoulder and grinned, letting out a loud laugh. “That’s good!” they called, almost encouragingly, as the Titan began running, short blonde hair bobbing as it chased them, square jaw open, lipless mouth displaying a mouthful of small teeth, bulky arms swinging by its side.

Krista shook their head slowly. *They're either completely insane, or they're actually fearless*, she thought. *Most people would be pissing their pants and running for the hills—most* Scouts *would probably be scared, too, even. But they. . . they're talking to it like it can actually* understand *them*.

"Say!" they added conversationally, tilting their head to glance at the Titan as they rode. "Once we're done with our walk, wanna come inside the Wall with me? What do you say?"

"That's probably not the best offer to make to a *Titan*," Jean muttered under his breath.

They dodged out of the way as the Titan roared, grabbing for them, and missing by a hair. "Woah!" They laughed. "That was close!"

The Titan growled in frustration, teeth grit as it continued chasing after them. They made a sudden confused, pained noise as they crashed face-first into a tree, having been paying attention to Hange rather than the road. The shaking branches raining needles down on them, wood splintering as its cheek made contact.

A few people chuckled.

"Oh, no," Hange said, frowning in concern as they turned back to look at it. "Are you okay?" they called.

"Well, it's not like it's going to respond," Eren said. Hange, for some reason, burst into laughter, and Levi huffed through his nose.

The Titan recovered quickly, but only managed to take another couple of steps before it's face made contact with another tree, sending them spinning to the ground, arms flailing comically around them. "Come this way!" Hange called as the Titan regained its footing, lumbering after them.

"Are they seriously playing tag with a *Titan?*" Connie hissed to Sasha.

"I. . . think so?"

Hange burst out of the forest, making a sharp turn that almost sent both themself and their horse crashing to the ground, the Titan crashing after them, kicking up a trail of dust and debris. "Atta boy," Hange grinned as they continued riding, watching the Titan as it chased after them, grunting with every step.

"That Titan's getting awfully close," Marco said nervously. A few people nodded in agreement. Even though they all knew they made it out fine (and, even if they didn't, they wouldn't truly be gone—not *really*), it was hard not to feel the inklings of stress.

A red smoke flare suddenly shot past the Titan, and it froze, looking around in confusion. "This way, moron," Levi said, riding past, gun still aimed at the Titan's face. Levi's Squad rode after him, the Titan following them with its eyes.

"Killjoy." Hange pouted.

"Well, if you want to end up boiling in a Titan's stomach, you can be my guest—"

Boiling in a Titan's stomach. Eren winced, temple throbbing. Mikasa glanced at him, frowning. "Eren?"

"Fine," he muttered.

"Headache again?" she asked.

Eren scowled. "It's fine," he said. "The light from the screen's really intense, okay?"

"But—"

"I'm *fine*."

"Hey, stay out of my way!" Hange yelled. The Titan's eyes left the other soldiers, drawn back to Hange, and it began running after them again, gaze fixed on the redhead. "That's the way!" Hange cried in delight. "Keep it up!"

"So it's *not* an Abnormal?" Armin blinked, surprised.

"What made you think it was an Abnormal?" Jean asked.

"Well," Armin said. "For one, it's being shown to us. And, from the setup of this episode so far, it looks like it's going to be pretty important. Why would we be sitting here, watching twenty-five minutes of moving pictures about a normal Titan?"

"Well, when you put it that way. . ." Sasha frowned. "I guess it is strange, then. Aren't Abnormals supposed to go after big groups?"

"Maybe it's an Abnormal Abnormal!" Connie said excitedly. "You know—instead of focusing on groups, they just focus on one person!" He looked around, frowning at the exasperated looks he was receiving from all sides. "What?"

"Connie, that's just a normal Titan."

The Titan's eyes widened, and its paced slowed. "Huh?" Hange turned to stare at it as it stopped running. "What?!" They yanked on their reins of their horse sharply, turning around to stare at the Titan.

"Oh," Eren said. "*Now* it's starting to act like an Abnormal!"

The Titan looked first to its left, then its right, a lost expression of confusion on its features before it turned and slowly walked off, headed towards a nearby grove of trees.

"Is it just me," Jean said, "or was that Titan actually showing expressions?"

"You're right!" Sasha said. "It looked kind of emotional."

"Really?" Krista said. "I thought it just looked kind of confused."

"Hey!" Hange called as it began running. "Wait up!" They kicked the horse's flank, charging after the Titan.

"For once, I agree with them," Mike said. "I'd be curious to see what it was doing, too."

"For *once?*" Hange pressed their hand to their chest, looking offended. "I'm wounded!"

The situation from before had been reversed—the Titan ran through the forest, and, though it was staring off into space, its gaze was focused. "Hey!" Hange shouted again, on the creature's heels. "Where are you going?"

"It looks like it's got a set goal," Sasha said. "You know—in its eyes." She waved a hand in front of her own golden orbs.

"How'd you know?" Connie asked. "I mean, it's a Titan—they've all got funky-looking eyes."

"You see that look in animals a lot," Sasha said sagely. "When they're headed back to their dens or babies."

"You think the Titan's got *babies*?" Eren looked faintly horrified at the idea.

"Oh, I *wish!*" Hange sighed wistfully. "Unfortunately. . ." they trailed off.

"What?" Connie asked.

"Uh-uh-uh!" Gunther held up a hand. "Hold up! You guys kept the last OVA's plot from us, so you're gonna have to sit through this one, too!"

"Oh, come on!"

"What's that shit-face up to?" Oluo asked as the Levi Squad chased after the pair. "Is it running back home?"

"Like what Sasha said!"

"Even if it's an Abnormal," Petra said. "There's something strange about this."

"Like what we were saying," Jean said.

"Yeah," Eld agreed, glancing at them. "Its movement patterns are like nothing that has ever been reported."

"No," Gunther argued. "They're called Abnormals *because* they don't behave normally, right?"

"Hold up!" Jean shouted, pointing at the screen. "Look, in the background—no, not that, that's a tree—is that *Jaeger* riding with them?"

"Oh, my Rose!" Sasha gasped. "It *is!*"

"But—*how?*" Armin gaped.

"He was with us at Cadets when the Expedition left," Jean said. "I remember, 'cause he wouldn't stop whining about it—"

"I don't *whine!*"

Marco had pulled a sheaf of papers out of his back pocket, and was flipping through it. "There's this thing called emu eggs—" he said. "No wait, Easter, not emu." He looked up at the others. "There're these things called Easter eggs that authors sometimes put in their stories. They're references that they leave there to let the audience pick up."

"So it's a reference to Eren joining the squad later?" Petra asked.

"Uh. . . maybe?" Marco shrugged. "I don't know—this is my first time watching this, too."

"I couldn't care less," Levi interrupted the conversation, yanking out a blade. "We're taking it down here."

“Yes, Captain!” Eren whooped, pumping a fist in the air. Levi shot him a withering glare, and the Shifter slowly lowered his arm, face red.

The earth shook as the Titan ran up a hill. “Hey, wait up!” Hange yelled again, their horse’s hooves pounding against the hard dirt. Hange chased the Titan around a tree, frowning. *Is it heading towards a specific place?* they wondered. *Even if it* is *an Abnormal, can a Titan do something like that?*

“There’s that thing we thought about earlier,” Jean said. “You know—the set goal, and all.”

“Was it?” Sasha asked, to which she received no reply.

The Titan ran into a clearing full of white flowers. Even though it was the middle of the day, the entire area glowed with a sort of mystic beauty; despite the bright blue sky and sun overhead, it was dark, but not too much—in fact, the dark blue lighting, caused by the countless tall, dense trees around them, of the setting only added to its appearance, making it look like it was illuminated by a full moon, rather than it clearly being in the afternoon.

“Wow,” Armin breathed. Logically, he knew that the land was still Wall Maria: humanity’s territory—well, *former* territory. But the ethereal appearance of the clearing almost looked how he’d imagined the untouched world outside the Walls to look: heavenly, almost. Four years in nature’s hold had left its mark, and, *Walls*, it was an amazing mark. Beauty undreamt of.

Hange yanked their horse to a stop, eyes widening at the scene. The camera moved back through the flowers—so white that they nearly glowed—showing the Titan standing in front of a pine tree in the centre of the clearing, illuminated by a solitary ray of pale sunlight that seemed to make the needles sparkle amidst the midnight blue shadows.

That one tree just really makes the place all the more mysterious, Jean thought. He frowned, tilting his head. *This place is still in Wall Maria, though, isn’t it? So does that mean it’s possible the tree was put there on purpose?* He shrugged. *Eh. Probably doesn’t matter?*

The Titan stared at the tree, eyes shining, looking—could it be? Sorrowful? Reverent?

“I think Jean’s right,” Mikasa said. “The Titan’s definitely expressing something.”

“Yeah,” Eren said. “But *what?*”

It took a step forwards, and, suddenly, without warning, bashed its head against the trunk with a loud grunt of pain. Splinters flew from the bark from the force of the impact, and the tree shook, top branches swaying.

“Holy—!” More than a few people jumped in their seats.

“Is the Titan hurting itself?” Petra gasped.

“We weren’t there for this part!” Eld said.

“Maybe it’s trying to break the tree!” Connie suggested.

“For what?”

“Uh. . .” He shrugged. “Little Titan house?”

“What?” Hange started as the Titan continued slamming their head against the wood, swinging a leg over their horse and landing on the ground. “What’s wrong?”

The Titan let out another grunt, gripping the trunk tightly as it landed another punishing blow to the temple against the bark. Hange reached into their jacket, pulling out a handle. “What are you doing?” they asked, eyes wide as they watched the Titan’s strange ritual, slotting their fingers into the triggers.

Oh! Krista blinked. *I see!* The erratic behaviour of the Titan had prompted them to get their triggers out, so that they could escape, if it attacked. *But there aren’t any blades*. They didn’t want to hurt the Titan—they were genuinely curious about its actions. *So, they’re not* completely *insane*.

“Is this the place you wanted to go to?” they asked as they approached, the Titan never faltering in its movements. Hange took another step forwards, boot landing on top of the short grass.

The Titan roared, swinging around and swiping an arm at Hange, tearing up grass and dirt. “Woah!” Cables shot out of Hange’s ODM, anchors burying themselves in a nearby tree, and they zipped away just in time to avoid becoming a splatter of red on the green-and-blue scenery. “That was close!”

They’ve got quick reflexes, Mikasa thought. *That must be how they’ve survived this long, if their first instinct is always just to walk up to a Titan and start discussing the weather*.

They landed on a branch, and the Titan glared up at them, brows drawn tightly together in evident frustration. The Titan roared through clenched teeth, hands moving slowly through the air.

“Hup!” Hange leapt off the branch, landing lightly on the ground, cables zipping back into their gear. “What is it?” they asked, walking closer.

“And you’re just going to walk back towards it?” Jean looked aghast.

“What’s wrong?” They smiled, though there was a bead of sweat on their cheek. “I’ll hear you out.”

Even they’re nervous at this point, Ymir thought. She sighed. The way the Titan had been looking at the tree—reverently, as if at a god—had been all too familiar to her. *Guess that makes two of us, then*.

The Titan growled, gums showing as its already lipless mouth grew even more lipless. Suddenly, another anchor dug into the Titan’s nape. “I’ve got this!” Oluo yelled, jumping up behind the Titan, blades drawn.

“Oluo!” Hange shouted. “Don’t do it!”

“What?!” Eren jumped to his feet, eyes wide.

“Are you kidding?” Jean stared at Hange, mouth gaping. *Never* distract a soldier in battle—that had been one of the first things they’d learned. *And they’re doing it to* protect *a* Titan*?*

"I know, I know," Hange sighed, looking, for the first time since the episode began, ashamed. "It was the wrong choice—" Levi's lips thinned, "—and I regret it. It was a mistake, and it won't happen again."

"Huh?" Oluo faltered, staring at Hange in confusion.

Krista grimaced. She knew how he felt—he must have been perplexed beyond compare. On one hand, there was his instinctive human instinct to *survive*—plus his battle reflexes hammered in by years of war. On the other hand, ignoring a direct order from a superior officer was practically a cardinal sin—*especially* in the Survey Corps, where following orders was the difference between living and dying, not only for yourself, but everyone around you, too. Krista hadn't been lived a very long life, either as a human or a soldier, but she already knew the importance of following orders.

And the price of going against them.

Quick as a flash, the Titan's hand closed around the grey-haired soldier, bringing him up to its open mouth, strings of spit hanging between its teeth. The man screamed, legs flailing.

A few people stiffened, despite the knowledge that the man would make it out fine.

There was the sound of a cable being reeled back faster than anything was designed to, and a flash of light shot by, severing the Titan's hand.

"Sweet Sina—!" Jean gasped.

He's fast. Ymir's eyes were wide as dinner plates. *He's fast. He's fucking* fast*.* In the back row, Annie, Reiner, and Bertolt exchanged furtive glances.

Blood and steam flew around Levi as he twisted in the air, regarding the Titan with cool disdain.

He cleaned himself by. . . spinning *the blood off?* Krista watched in awe.

He whirled around the Titan, shooting his own anchor into its nape. He shot forwards, spinning through the air, nearly grazing the ground as he gathered momentum.

It's like he's really flying! Connie's eyes were in serious danger of landing on the carpet. *Like the ODM's a part of him, not just a tool!*

He let out a shout, propelling himself up, a flash of sunlight bouncing off metal as a chunk of bloody flesh flew into the air.

Even Mikasa had to admit, grudgingly, that the short man was good at his job.

The Titan let out a final jerk before twisting and landing on its back, steam rising from its carved-out nape. "Uh—!" Hange stared in shock.

Levi raised his hand, frowning at the blood on his sword and wrist. "Tch." He wiped at it with a handkerchief as the remains of the Titan evaporated from the blade and his cloak in a puff of steam. "Are you okay?" he asked, glancing at Oluo.

Mikasa frowned. *I didn't peg him as the type to care about his team's safety that much*, she thought. *I thought he'd be more 'if you're weak, then die', and less jumping in to save subordinates*.

"Captain. . ." Oluo lay, flopped in the Titan's steaming, severed hand, face streaming with snot and tears. He sniffed loudly, drawing runny snot back up his nostrils. "I'll follow your orders forever!" he sobbed, face beaded with sweat.

Sitting on their comfy couches, arms full of food and drinks, with the knowledge that Oluo was safe, right beside them, it was easy to laugh.

"Shut up, you brats—mmph!" Oluo let out a half-shriek, half-sob as his teeth closed over his tongue.

"How is he still alive?" Sasha marvelled, watching as Eld yanked his head back and Gunther jammed a napkin into his mouth.

"Trust me," Petra said wearily. "We've been wondering the same thing."

"Uh. . ." Hange raised their arms shakily, staring at the Titan with horror. "This child was to be. . . an important specimen." They let out a small whimper of grief, collapsing to their knees, Eld and Gunther watching on.

Child? Ymir wrinkled her nose, decidedly unsettled.

Levi made a small noise of annoyance as he sheathed his sword, gritting his teeth. "If we could've captured him," Hange continued, head lowered. "Humanity might have taken the next step forwards."

Yes, Jean thought. *But at what cost? One life, for sure. But how many more would have been lost trying to capture it? And if it had escaped* inside *the Walls?* He shuddered. *Might have been safer for Oluo to kill it right then and there*.

Levi marched over to them, grabbing their collar and yanking them up to glare into their eyes, face-to-face. "Shut up, you four-eyed bitch!" he snarled, grip tightening.

Eyebrows disappeared into hairlines at the recruits, and some of the veterans, watched in shock. *He always acts more like he'd be the cold, quiet anger type, rather than explosive fury*. Sasha thought back to watching the Corps leave for another expedition the day of the Attack on Trost. He'd been positively radiating with annoyance, but the sudden outburst and shouting had been more than a little bit of a surprise.

He really does care. Mikasa frowned, unsettled at the sudden, new take on the man she'd been leading herself to hate for the past month and a half, despite—admittedly—knowing nothing about him.

"If you want to end up as Titan shit, I won't stop you." If looks could kill, Hange would be dead five times over. "But don't you dare endanger the lives of my men!" He gave them a little shake to send his point home, a dangerous, bright light in his eyes as he raised his voice, ending the sentence in a shout.

His eyes. . . Krista shuddered. At that moment, she was one hundred percent certain that the man on the screen was capable of murder.

Hange blinked at him, a single drop of sweat rolling down their face, mouth agape in surprise. Finally, they closed their mouth, smiling faintly. "Titans don't defecate," they informed him politely.

Around the room, jaws dropped.

"They don't have a digestive system." Levi stared at them, eyes wide, lips slightly parted in shock.

Many faces mirrored the Captain's on the screen.

"You really just said that, didn't you?" Moblit said faintly, looking ready to pass out.

Levi scowled, lowering them slightly. "Tch!" He shoved them roughly backwards, and they let out a small yelp, landing on their rump as he continued glaring daggers at them.

"Well," Connie said, the room still silent, most people trapped in a state of shock. "At least now we know the answer to the question."

"What question?" Sasha asked.

"How to not be killed by the Captain!" Connie grinned. "Just confuse him out of it!"

"Oh, my god," Jean groaned, burying his face in his hands.

Petra exhaled through her nose as she glanced away from the exchange. "Huh?" Her eyes widened. "Um, Captain?"

"What?" Connie asked. "What is it?"

"Maybe if you shut up, we'll find out," Ymir muttered. *Or, you know. Keep talking. And we never find out. That works, too*.

Levi looked up as Petra took a step back, drawing her hands to her chest. "What is it?" he asked as she stared ahead, face pale.

"You look scared," Sasha noted. "What's up?"

"Did a Titan do that?" the ginger asked as an eerie piano melody began playing. "But. . ." Oluo and Levi watched her, Oluo shocked, Levi impassive. "It *can't* be. . ."

Ominous music, again, Eren thought. *Something's gonna happen*.

"What are you talking about?" Levi demanded. Petra reached a shaky hand forwards, pointing ahead at the tree.

The recruits and veterans who hadn't been present leaned forwards.

There, in the centre of the trunk, was a hole. More wood had grown over it, almost completely covering it up, but, clearly visible inside, sitting on a layer of sticks, pine mulch, and needles, was a corpse.

"Oh, my god," Krista whispered, ashen-faced.

The skeleton was headless, dressed in A Scout's uniform, clothes worn and dirty with age, blood soaking the cloak up to just below their shoulders. Their hands had been picked clean, bones yellowed with age, protected from the elements by the thick bark of the tree.

"It's sitting like it's on a throne," Mikasa said quietly.

"Do you think it's some sort of. . . I don't know. Titan religion?" Gunther suggested. Ymir's hand twitched. Krista shot her a questioning glance, and the brunette managed to pass it off as an aggressive grab at the crackers.

"But why would Titans worship a Scout?" Moblit asked. "We're the ones who kill them, after all."

"Do you think Titans can worship at all?" Petra said. "I mean, it's not like they've really got the mental capacity for. . . well, anything, really."

"Maybe the Titan just used the body to symbolize the deity?" Sasha said.

"Why would a Titan keep the body, though?" Jean said. "And *why* would Titans have a *god?*"

"Well, we'll just have to keep watching the episode to find out," Erwin said. *I agree that the expression the Titan had when looking at Ilse's body was strange, but calling it worship might be going a little far. No*. He frowned. *If anything, it looked* regretful.

Oluo made a terrified noise as he leapt to his feet, face pale. The rest of the squad gathered around Levi as he watched Hange approach the tree. They climbed up onto the tree roots, leaning into the nook where the skeleton sat.

They reached towards the body, moving aside the torn, blood-stained cloak, and grabbing the sleeve. "The emblem from the 34th Expedition," they said, expression blank as they looked at the patch.

They're remarkably calm, considering they're sharing a nook with a beheaded skeleton right now, Jean thought. *How many times have they done this?* A cold wave washed over him. *And how many times will* we *have to do it?*

"This soldier died a year ago." The other soldiers watched, visibly uncomfortable. Levi glanced off to the side, pursing his lips. "The soldier's name was. . . Let's see. . ." Levi blinked, turning back to look at the tree. "Ilse Langar."

Ymir raised her eyebrows. *What did he see?*

Levi walked forwards, kneeling on the ground. There, the corner stuck beneath a tree root that had grown over it, was a small, leather notebook, cover moldly, pages wrinkled and yellowed both from age and the assault by nature.

"Is that—?" Mike began. Hange nodded.

"What?" Eren asked.

Hange sighed, still perched on the edge of the hole as Levi stood up, turning the ledger over in his hands. "I can't believe it," they sighed. "Why would a Titan do such—" They turned, noticing the book Levi held in his hands. "Levi?" They asked. "What's that?"

Levi turned a page slowly, the paper thin and full of holes, waters stains on every available surface, eyes wide as he read. "It's the fruit of Ilse Langar's labour," he said.

"A journal?" Armin inquired.

"But how important could a journal be?" Jean asked.

Hange shook their head slowly. "You'll see," they said. They frowned as a sudden thought hit them. *But the episodes are twenty-five minutes, and we've only gotten through half of this one—is the rest of the episode just going to be me reading the notebook?* They shook their head. *No way—there's* gotta *be something else they're gonna show us*.

Currently Available Information

Mode of Life of a Titan, Part 1

"What does that mean?" Eren asked.

"Probably how Titans live," Armin said. "Or how they. . . you know, *live*. Function. What they are."

"But we *don't* know that," Mikasa said. "So why would an info card have that information?"

A line ran across the centre of the screen, the top side labelled '*Humans*', and the bottom, '*Titan*'. On the human side of the line, there were the silhouettes of four figures: an ape, bent over on all fours; following that, there was another, ape-like creature, this time standing on two feet; the third silhouette seemed to be somewhere between an ape and a man, its back straighter, carrying a stick in one hand; the final image was of a soldier, one ODM blade drawn. An arrow was drawn over the entire thing, linking them all in one timeline.

"That's the timeline of human evolution, isn't it?" Mike said.

On the Titan's side of the screen, however, was different—rather than there being stages of evolution, there was, instead, just a Titan (or, rather, its foot, since the entire figure clearly couldn't fit on the screen.

Sasha squinted at the screen, scrunching up her nose. "Is that the Colossal's foot?" Bertolt jumped in the back of the room, and Reiner shot him a short glance.

***The source of the Titans was not specified in the written history we have, and their lives are unclear*.**

"Oh, I see!" Armin said. "So, this is showing us how humans have evolved over time versus Titans, which seemed to just appear out of nowhere one day."

Hange frowned, scratching their chin. "Yes," they said. "But. . . no, that couldn't be possible. . . or, maybe?"

"What are you thinking?" Erwin asked.

"Just a theory," Hange said. "Well, a theory built on another theory, really. So, you know how we speculated that Eren was *turned* into a Shifter?"

"Yeah?"

"So where would a Titan Shifter fit onto the timeline?" Hange asked. "Do they count as humans? Titans?"

“Well, what if Eren’s the only Shifter?” Sasha asked. Eren frowned, tossing the thought around, weighing it in his head.

“Maybe,” Armin frowned. “Or maybe it’s because he was—theoretically—turned into one?”

Hange shrugged, making a note in the corner of their notebook. They also quickly scribbled down a sketch of the twisted helixes in the background of the image—they weren’t completely sure what they were, but they had a feeling it would be important.

Mode of Life of a Titan, Part 2

An image of the Colossal Titan appeared. The Titan held a human over its mouth by their foot, teeth closing over it. A circle symbolizing its stomach sat at the bottom of the screen, full of human bones and skulls.

A few people grimaced at the sight, and Bertolt shrank in on himself, paling slightly.

“Looks like the Colossal’s this Ee-saw-yah-ma guy’s go-to when Titan information’s being revealed,” Eld muttered.

***The only behavioral principle of Titans is to eat human beings. However, in varied data and documents, their aim is killing, not predation*.**

“We learned about that,” Eren said, feeling a familiar prick of anger in his gut. *Bastards—they can survive if they don’t eat us! So why do they?*

An image of the notebook appeared, open to a page covered in messy, loopy scrawls, the paper yellowed, and the edges brown from exposure.

“Dang, that’s messy handwriting,” Jean said.

“It must have been written in a hurry,” Krista said. “Since she was outside the Walls, and all.”

Gunther leaned forwards a bit, peering at the screen. “*My name is Ilsf*—no, wait, that’s an E. *My name is Ilse Langar*. . . yeah, and there’s her position, Snd—Snd?”

“That’s a 2,” Petra said. “Second Battalion, perimeter defense.”

“No, it’s an S!”

“Why would she be part of the *S*nd Battallion, that doesn’t even exist—"

The sound of feet hitting the ground as someone ran, and the pants of heavy, laboured breathing faded in, and the image changed.

“Huh?” Levi frowned.

A tanned hand clenched the notebook, the other scrawling in it furiously with a stick of charcoal, wrapped in cloth, writing down what they’d just seen. The angle switched, showing a dark-haired Scout running through the plains, sweat running down her face, short brown hair and cloak fluttering as she ran.

Sasha gasped. “So we’re going to be able to *see* what happened?”

"That's amazing!" Armin's eyes were wide with wonder.

"Yeah." Ymir grimaced. "Fantastic."

Hange barely held back a squeal. They couldn't *wait* to see a Titan speak!

"*My name is Ilse Langar*," her voice narrated as she moved her pencil furiously, glancing up. "*I am part of the 34th Expedition Beyond the Walls*." The setting sun was slowly lowering behind a forested mountain, bathing everything in a golden light. Dry, summer grasses moved lazily in the breeze as she ran by, stumbling on tired feet. "*Second Battalion, in charge of perimeter defense*."

Petra shot Gunther a triumphant look, and he rolled his eyes, holding his hands up.

The image faded, showing a group of three Titans ravaging an abandoned village. "*On our way back, we encountered some Titans*." A blond-haired Scout screamed, terrified, as a black-haired Titan reached forwards, snatching him from the ground and bringing him up to his mouth.

The Scouts watched on grimly, expressions stony. *I remember that*, Erwin thought. *They were all officially listed MIA until we found the notebook. Not that any of us really had any hope that any of them had made it out, but*— He sighed, repressing the urge to chuckle at the irony. *Well,* she *did, didn't she? Only to walk straight to her death.*

"*On our way back, we encountered some Titans*." Ilse lay in a nearby river, soaking-wet and watching on in horror as sparks and smoke drifted into the air. She turned, stumbling out of the river.

"I can't even imagine what that must be like," Sasha said quietly. "To be *right there*, and not be able to do anything else but run."

Eld grimaced. "Sometimes, the only thing you *can* do is run," he said. "Most people wouldn't even be able to take on two Titans at once. Better to pick your battles." A few other veterans murmured in agreement.

"*I lost everyone in my squad, even my horse*." She stumbled forwards, water dripping from her cloak, clothes, and hair.

Nearly everybody in the room winced. The veterans knew (some first, most, second-hand) what it meant to be alone and horseless outside the Walls, and the recruits had heard enough horror stories from the instructors at boot camp to know it was a fate none of them wanted to suffer.

"*My maneuver gear was damaged, so I had to leave it behind*." She unclipped the heavy, metal boxes, and they dropped to the ground with loud *thunks* as she began running, reaching into her breast pocket and pulling out the notebook and pencil.

"ODM and water don't mix," Hange explained, noticing a few confused looks from the recruits. "It's fine for rain—well, it's a bit more difficult to use, since you'd probably be slipping and sliding everywhere, but, it's still be functional, even in a shitstorm of a downpour."

"But submergence?" Mike shook his head. "It was doomed from the moment she jumped in that river. Better to leave it behind. She'll be able to run faster."

"Swords are no good against Titans anyways, if you can't reach the napes," Moblit added.

"*I am running due north*." The sun was a mixture of pink, from the setting sun, and the deep blue of twilight, fluffy clouds drifting overhead as she ran.

To reach the Walls, Armin thought. *If she's good at navigation—and any soldier, even an MP, should be—all she'll have to worry about is avoiding Titans*.

Candlelight reflected off of Hange's glasses as they sat in their office, reading what Ilse had written. Bookshelves lined the walls, packed to bursting with thick, heavy tomes. Even more volumes were stacked around the office in teetering towers, casting long shadows across the room, lit only by the single candle on their desk.

"That's a lot of books," Armin said, eyes widening. "Almost more than they've got here!"

"Yeah?" Hange grinned at the excited look on the blond boy's face. "You wanna take a look when we get back?"

"Really?" Armin looked like Winterfest had come early.

Hange had stuck notes on the wall over the desk and below the window, and they sat, hands on the fragile paper, holding the notebook open gingerly as they read.

"*I have lost my horse in the lands ruled by Titans*," Ilse's voice continued narrating as Hange read through the notes.

"*No human can outrun a Titan on foot*." Ilse sat under the cover of a massive boulder, knees drawn to her chest, hood pulled up as rain poured, the sky dark, the forests behind her distinguishable only as darker smudges on the grey landscape.

Levi grimaced at the weather.

There were tears in her eyes as she continued writing. "*My chances of returning to the city are despairingly low*." Large, fat teardrops ran down her cheeks, lips quivering.

"And even then, she still wasn't giving up," Krista murmured, her respect for the woman growing with every passing moment. *Even writing everything down, when she knew that the chances of her getting home were near impossible.*

"*However*. . ." Ilse ran down a dirt road, cape fluttering behind her, a dark silhouette against the rising sun. "*If I avoid contact with Titans, I might be able to reach the Wall*."

Krista tilted her head, looking at the woman. "Now that I think about it, she kind of looks like you, Ymir," she said.

Ymri raised her eyebrows, trying to calm the feeling of panic that was slowly crushing her into the beanbag chair. "Oh, yeah?"

"Mhm." Krista nodded. "Don't you think?"

Ymir shrugged, looking back at the screen. *She looks like me*, she thought. *And the Titan. . . well, there's no doubt in my mind that she was devoted enough to remember, even in that form*. Her eyes widened by a fraction of an inch as a thought connected in her head, a fact, buried in the mounds of memories that didn't belong to her, popping up and rearing its ugly head. *The position*. She clenched her fist. *The Titan's expression. Could it be—*?

She shook her head. *Calm down*, she thought. *It's a small chance—and, by small, I mean* small. She took a deep breath. *I'm overthinking*, she thought. *I'm overthinking*.

She continued writing in her notebook, hood drawn over her head, as the sun climbed ever higher. "*That's right*." She glanced up, gaze stiff with determination. "*Right now, I must not give into fear*."

"She's so brave," Sasha whispered. If it were her, she probably would have just sat on the ground and cried until a Titan had found her—no, scratch that: if it were her, she would've been eaten with the rest of the squad.

"*I have been prepared for this scenario since the day I joined the Scouting Legion*." The silvery shine of the full moon almost made the clouds in the deep, blue sky glow, the trunks and needles of the pine forest below illuminated by the moonlight.

"She survived an entire day outside the Walls," Jean said, eyes wide in both admiration and pity. Admiration, for the obvious reasons; pity, because he knew it would all be in vain. "All alone, without a horse, or even any gear."

"She's amazing," Connie agreed.

"*I am the wings of humanity, making its last stand*." Ilse crouched on the ground, by the roots of a large pine tree, scribbling in the notebook.

"Her hood's still up," Mikasa noticed.

"It must be to help her hide from the Titans," Armin said. "They find prey based on sight and sound, don't they? If she can blend in with surroundings, then that's all the better for her."

"Huh," Eren said. The forest-green of their cloaks suddenly made all the more sense.

The woman closed her eyes, taking a deep breath before continuing her documentation. "*I am a member of the Scouting Legion!*" There was a loud, rustling noise behind her, and she stiffened, glancing over her shoulder, eyes wide. "*I will fight to the end, even if I end up dying!*" She looked around, sweat shining on her face, before turning back to the notebook, hands shaking slightly.

Even when she's so scared, she's writing everything down. If it were any other situation, Ymir would be admiring the woman, applauding her along with her comrades, but, in her current predicament, she couldn't help but silently bemoan Ilse's tenacity, if she'd documented what the girl suspected she had. Krista watched her discreetly, face turned towards the screen, eyes on the other girl.

"*I have no weapons, but I can still fight!*" Ilse ran down a rocky slope, uneven and covered in moss, leaping over a waterfall, glittering in the sunlight, dappled green as it filtered through the leaves of the forest.

It's beautiful. For a moment, Krista was shaken out of her thoughts of Ilse, Ymir, and. . . well everything. *The world really is a gorgeous place*. She bit her lip, thinking about the ending song. *Beautiful and cruel*.

"*I will record my experiences on this paper, and do everything I can!*" Ilse vowed, her pencil scrawling messy, disjointed words across the page as she ran into a clearing in the woods full of white flowers.

"Oh," Sasha said quietly, the only sound in the room so silent, you could hear a pin drop on the thick carpet.

"*I will not give up!*" Her eyes were wide, almost wild, with fear, teeth clenched, sweat pouring down her face. "*I will not give up!*" Her hair was awry, greasy from days of running, strands sticking to her forehead from the sweat.

"She was so close to the Wall, too," Petra said, eyes swimming with unshed tears. Despite knowing what Ilse's ultimate fate was—hell, *she'd* been the one who'd found the body—she still couldn't help but hope. "She'd made it two days—she only needed a few more hours, and she would've been safe." Eld clenched his fists, looking down, and Oluo put a soft, tentative hand on her shoulder, squeezing gently.

The image slowed as she ran past the pine tree at the centre of the clearing, looking up in horror. The blonde, frowny Titan turned its head, watching as Ilse ran past, one hand perched on the trunk of the tree. The soldier looked up, eyes widening with horror as she passed, the Titan leaning down over her.

"No," Armin whispered, barely louder than a fly gasping.

People die. Mikasa watched the show stonily, face carefully blank. *That's what they* do. She pursed her lips at the sight of Ilse's horrified face, notebook clenched tightly in her hand like a lifeline. *But it never gets easier to watch*.

Time sped up again as Ilse let out a terrified gasp, tumbling out of the way as the Titan roared, pouncing. She collapsed with a fearful squeak, back pressed up to the trunk of the tree as the Titan crawled towards her on all fours, still growling. An ominous, choral tune began playing as Ilse looked up, entire body shaking like a leaf in the wind, positively drenched with sweat. The Titan growled, teeth clenched, as it loomed over her, eyes wide, wild with some sort of manic light as it stared at her.

Hange watched the screen, eyes bouncing from one point to another, pen flying across the page of their own notebook, the tip ripping the pages as they scrawled down every detail they could notice. A part of them felt guilty about quietly wishing Ilse's death would come faster, but the other part was screaming that seeing the Titan talk was the most important part. *What's done is done*, they thought. *She's dead, and nothing's going to change that—not us*

watching, not us praying, not even an amazing soundtrack. All we can do is learn from what she gave us.

A tear ran down Ilse's face as she stared, hair moving with every breath the Titan took. "I—" She looked down at the notebook, hands shaking too hard for her to even bring them together. "I will not. . ." She forced the tip of the pencil to the page. "Give up!"

"Even then?" Mike was beyond positive that, were he in her position, he'd be bawling like a baby, pants stained brown.

She's so brave. Jean couldn't help thinking back to the spineless cadets in charge of guarding the supply depot during the Battle of Trost, more inclined towards stuffing their skulls with lead rather than doing their jobs and parts. *She's got a million times their guts—which is what I* would *say, but, unfortunately, a million times zero is still zero*.

"*I have encountered a Titan*." Ilse's pencil moved as the Titan continued staring at her, huffing and puffing. "*It's a seven—*" A river of tears flowed down both cheeks as she wrote, nose wet with snot. "*No, six-metre class.*" She glanced up, staring at the Titan as it continued watching her. "*He didn't attack me right away. Is it an Abnormal?*"

"It's not eating her," Sasha realized. "Why?"

"Is it waiting?" Armin asked.

"Does it recognize her?" Ymir jolted at Connie's question, feeling like an electric shock had just run through her.

"Don't be ridiculous," Eren said. "How could a *Titan* recognize a *human*? And a *Scout*, at that?"

The Titan leaned forwards, the tip of its nose less than an arm's reach away from Ilse's face. She looked back down at the notebook, tears dripping from her chin. "*This is the end of the line*," she wrote as the Titan sniffed. "*This is as far as I go*." The Titan's head bobbed as it stared at her. "*I have lived a whimsical life*." She let out a terrified sob. "*I haven't done anything for my parents yet! I feel sick!*" She shook as she wrote, the tears increasing in tenfold. "*The end*."

"Is this how it ends?" Eren asked, surprised, and slightly disappointed.

"But I thought there'd be. . . well, more." Sasha spoke his sentiments out loud, cringing at how it sounded. "I mean—!" she said. "Well, I thought there'd be more to the story, since there's an entire episode about it, you know?"

"There is more," Hange said. "The journal continued after that."

"Y. . . mir's. . ." Ilse's eyes widened.

Eren's jaw nearly detached from his skull as his mouth fell open—and he wasn't the only one. Around the room, the recruits, and even some of the veterans, were staring, slack-jawed, mouths agape.

While Hange would have loved to savour the sound of the Titan's voice, they instead turned their head around, looking at the Ymir in the room. The girl's tanned face was pale, freckles standing out from her pallid expression.

"*Ymir?*" More than a few people followed Hange's gaze, looking at the girl.

"Why did the Titan say your name?" Eren demanded, almost accusingly.

"I—" Ymir swallowed. "I don't know," she said.

"But—"

"I'm *not* friends with a Titan, in case you're wondering." Ymir scowled, but she was still pale, and her hand was shaking, ever so slightly.

"It said your *name!*" Connie squeaked.

"I don't know how it knows my name!" Ymir snapped. "I've never even been outside the Walls before! And I've *definitely* never met Ilse Langar in my life—hell, I didn't even know she *existed* before this episode!"

"Maybe it's fluke," Krista suddenly suggested. "I mean—okay, fine the Titan was obviously *saying* it on purpose, but we don't know for sure it meant *our* Ymir. We don't even know if it meant Ymir, as a person, at all. Who knows, Ymir could be the name of the place Titans come from, or something." Reiner's gaze, which had, for the entire conversation, been fixed on Ymir, flicked to Krista.

"Well," Moblit said. "We never did think of that."

"Right?" Krista nodded. "Or—well, it could mean any number of things. But I think we can all agree that the chances of the Titan talking about a person—or, at least, *this* person—is next to zero."

"I suppose so," Erwin said, though his eyes never left the brunette.

"Is that all the Titan said?" Eren asked.

Hange shook their head. "Not even close."

The Titan's lips moved, stiff, disjointed words falling from its lips, seemingly with great difficulty. "People."

"Ymir's People?" Ymir blinked rapidly, focusing on the screen, as Sasha spoke. "What does that mean?"

Ilse stared up at the Titan, eyes wide with shock. She sat up a little as the Titan straightened. "*It just spoke*." She blinked, staring up at the Titan, eyes wide with astonishment. "*The Titan just spoke*." Her pencil moved across the page, as if on its own accord. The Titan stared down at her, seemingly waiting or her to respond. "*No way*."

For a moment, Erwin was distracted by his thoughts of Ymir and Titans by a new idea. *Should we make it mandatory to carry around a notebook for all Scouts?* he wondered. What, to anybody else, might have seemed like a silly idea, suddenly sounded like it actually made a lot of sense. *But the chances of situations like this are next to zero*, the other side of his mind

argued. *Is it really worth risking a soldier's life, having them write, rather than fight, just so we have a few sentences of extra information?*

The Titan leaned forwards a bit, parting its lips again. "Lady Ymir," it croaked. It pressed its hand into the earth and lowered its head, closing its eyes. "Welcome."

"'Lady Ymir,'" Jean muttered. "And it's bowing, too."

"Sure *sounds* like it's talking 'bout a god," Gunther muttered. "Or royalty, at least."

Ilse stared at it, eyes wider than the known world, tears still flowing down her cheeks, though she no longer looked scared. "*The Titan is speaking words that I can understand*." She looked back at the notebook, scribbling in it. "*'Ymir's people.' 'Lady Ymir.' 'Welcome.'*" The Titan kept its head down the entire time, bowing to the soldier. "*There's no doubt: the Titan is showing facial expressions*." It was true: the Titan's eyes were closed, expression calm, respect etched into every part of its features, as if bowing to a king, or a god. "*It appears to be showing respect to me*."

"Oh, I wish I was her," Hange sighed.

"Maybe not," Moblit whispered back.

"Hm? Why?"

"Her *head* was crushed, remember?"

"Oh, yeah." Hange's face fell. "Right."

Ilse raised a hand, wiping away the line of tears from her left eye. "*I can't believe it! For the first time in the history of humanity, I'm communicating with a Titan?!*"

"Annie," Reiner hissed into Annie's ear as he leaned over, plucking a toothpick from the plate on Bertolt's lap. "Do you want to be a Titan right now?"

"What?" She turned to stare at him, incredulous. "Are you—no, I *never* want to be—"

"Good." Reiner's raised his hand, stabbing the toothpick into Annie's palm. She let out a cry of pain, grabbing the end of the wooden skewer and yanking it out of her flesh.

"What the *fuck?!*" she snarled, gripping her bloody palm with her other hand. *Don't heal*, she begged her own body, pushing down the electric, sparking heat she felt rise inside her. *Don't heal. Don't transform. Don't do* anything.

"Shit!" Reiner's eyes widened as everyone turned around to look at them. "I am *so* sorry!" He grabbed her hands, pulling her to her feet. "I—wow, shit, Annie, are you okay?"

"What happened?" Erwin asked.

"Fucking *toothpick*," Annie hissed through clenched teeth as the wound began to throb.

"Is there somewhere we can get this cleaned up?" Reiner asked, turning to look at Omni.

Omni's cold, galactic gaze sent chills down Reiner's spine as she looked at him (*She knows*, he thought. *She knows everything. She knows who we are. What we're doing*.). "There's a bathroom over there," she said finally, nodding her head at a door on the other side of the living room. "First-aid kit's in the cupboard over the sink."

"I'll go!" Krista volunteered, leaping to her feet.

"No!" Krista blinked at Reiner's harsh tone. "I mean—" he coughed. "Sorry, Krista," he said. "We've got this."

"'We?'" Eren raised an eyebrow.

"Bertolt." The tall boy blinked. "Come on."

"Oh—uh, right!" The brunet jumped to his feet, and the three made their way across the room, jamming themselves into the bathroom as fast as they could without actually running, the gazes of their enemies burning holes into their backs.

The moment they were in the bathroom, Annie yanked her hands away from Reiner and slapped him across the cheek. Hard.

"Son of a—" Reiner stumbled, wincing as he touched the bloody handprint on his cheek. "They'll have heard that," he warned, touching the tip of a finger to the blood and grimacing as he felt the sticky warmth, the red mark underneath already fading.

"Tell them you tripped, or something," Annie spat, steam rising from her the mark on her hand, skin and muscle knitting back together. "What the *fuck* were you thinking?"

"We needed to get out of there," Reiner said. "We need to talk—"

"There's time to talk later," Annie interrupted. Behind her, Bertolt quietly walked into the shower (they could tell it was a shower, but it was far more luxurious than any ones they had in their world—sleek and fancy, like everything else at the branch), leaning against the tile wall. "What's so important that you—" She smacked Reiner's shoulder. "Couldn't—" *Smack*. "Fucking—" *Smack*. "Wait?"

"Ymir."

"What about Ymir?" Bertolt asked quietly, watching them through the glass door of the shower.

"I think she knows something," Reiner said. "Something about, you know—" he glanced around. "*Us*. *Marley*."

"What gave you that idea?" Annie snapped, sitting down on the toilet seat, glaring up at him.

"Did you see the way she reacted to the Titan?" Reiner asked. "She was shocked, yes, but not enough—not *nearly* enough. Think: you're a normal human being, and a Titan just said your name. Most people would be shitting their pants. She just kinda blinked for a bit. And that speech about not knowing the Titan sounded way too prepared, don't you think?"

Annie sighed, standing up and shoving Reiner aside to reach the sink. "It's weird," she agreed. "But Ymir's pretty composed about most things, anyways. There was no need for your fucking *display*." She glared at him in the mirror as she pumped soap into her hand, bringing it up and sniffing it, wrinkling her nose. "Smells like flowers," she grumbled, turning on the tap.

“Maybe,” Bertolt said as Reiner crossed his arms, looking exasperated. “Maybe the Titan was one of those Restorationists? You know, the ones in the news about thirty years ago? The commanders talk about them sometimes.”

“Maybe,” Reiner muttered as Annie dried her hands on a thick, fluffy towel hanging on the wall. “But that’s not what I’m thinking about—sure, most Eldians know Ymir’s name, but it’s the bowing at Langar part that bothers me.”

“Why?” Bertolt asked as Annie sat back down on the toilet seat and Reiner took his turn at the sink.

“I heard Krista talking earlier—” Annie snorted, and he glared at her. “She told Ymir that she looked like Langar.”

Annie frowned. “Well, yes,” she said. “But that doesn’t necessarily mean anything.”

“Do you really think that Ymir came from Marley?” Bertolt asked.

Reiner sighed, wiping at the blood on his cheek. “I don’t know,” he admitted. “The only way she *could* have ended up at the Walls is if she—” He closed his mouth, and Annie pursed her lips.

“Well, we know there’s at least one Shifter out there that we don’t know the identity of,” she said quietly.

“But that still doesn’t necessarily mean it’s her,” Bertolt said. “Ymir’s an uncommon name, sure, but there are still some people inside the Walls called that. I mean, the shopkeeper’s wife down the street from headquarters is called Ymir.”

Reiner sighed, drying his face off on the same towel. “Fine,” he said. “But make sure to watch her carefully for the rest of the episode—we need to see what reactions she makes.”

Bertolt nodded, standing up and moving over to open the cupboard over the sink. “We should probably put a bandage on your hand, just for show,” he said, taking out a bright red bag, conveniently labelled “First-Aid”. Annie rolled her eyes, but held out her formerly injured hand as Bertolt opened the bag (starting a little at the feel of a zipper).

“Are these the bandages?” he asked, frowning as he held up a small, paper rectangle. “They say ‘band-aid.’”

“Sounds like a bandage,” Annie said. Bertolt stared at the instructions on the paper packaging for a second before finally opening it, sticking it carefully on Annie’s hand, cheeks red.

The blonde wrinkled her nose as she flexed her palm, feeling the stickiness of the patch. “Feels weird.” She sighed. “Come on.” She stood up. “We should probably go, before they get too suspicious.”

“Everything okay?” Mike asked as the three resurfaced from the bathroom, sitting down on their couch. “You good, Leonhart?”

Annie nodded, settling back in her seat.

"Alright." Erwin nodded. "Let's continue."

Ilse opened her mouth. "I—" She took a deep breath, trying again. "What. . . are you?"

It'd have be great if it gave an answer, Hange sighed.

The Titan opened its mouth, letting out a low groan. "*I asked this Titan about his nature*." The Titan groaned again, screwing up its eyes. "*Instead of talking, it's moaning*." The Titan's head shuddered as it ground its teeth.

"It looks like it's in pain," Eren said, frowning. "But why? She hasn't done anything."

"Except talk," Mikasa said.

"Sensitive ears?" Armin suggested.

"In a Titan?" Eren furrowed his brow. "Is that even possible?"

"Where did you come from?" Ilse asked, pencil moving over the paper. "*I asked him for a location*." The Titan's entire body was shaking now, its face screwed up, mixes of groans and whimpers falling from its lips as it squeezed its eyes shut. "*He didn't respond*."

"She should probably get out of there," Sasha said nervously. "I would."

But she didn't, Krista thought sadly.

"Why do you eat us?" Ilse demanded, no longer crying. "*I asked him for a motive*." The Titan had covered its face with its hands, shuddering.

"Maybe it's trying to answer, but can't?" Connie said.

Jean frowned. "It almost looks like it's crying," he said.

Is it trying not to eat her? Mike wondered.

Ilse stared at it. A maniacal light suddenly overtook her, and her eyes widened, golden orbs bright with an insane fury. "Why do you eat us?" she screeched, jumping to her feet. "You don't die of you don't eat anything!" she yelled.

"No, no, no!" Sasha cried. "Don't scream!"

A low drum beat began sounding out in the background, growing louder, reverberating like thunder as Ilse screamed demands and accusations at the Titan. "Why?! Go back to the nothing you came from!" She threw her hand, clenching the notebook, to the side. "Disappear from this world!"

"*No*," Petra whispered as the music suddenly crescendoed.

The Titan looked up with an agonized groan, fingers digging into its face. Ilse gasped, stumbling backwards as it tore at its flesh, blood flowing from its chin, dripping into the grass, like a small river.

"Oh, goddesses." Jean's hand flew up to his mouth.

"Why's it hurting itself?" Oluo demanded.

"It's like it's trying to stop itself!" Eld said.

She stumbled into the tree, throwing up a hand against the trunk. "What's going on?"

"I, too, would like to know," Connie whispered.

"*Not* the time, Connie," Sasha hissed. "Even though I agree," she added.

The Titan yelled in agony, the flesh on its skin torn away, nails digging into exposed muscle.

Eren's face tingled just watching, and he leaned back, wincing.

"Sina, Maria, Rose, and above," Mike choked out.

Ymir's eyes were wide as she watched, mouth a thin line. Reiner's gaze never left her, while Annie and Bertolt's kept flicking between the screen and her.

Blood spurted from its face in miniature fountains, and Ilse gasped, turning and running away.

Too late, Levi thought grimly. *Too, too late*.

The Titan turned, fingers still pulling at its own flesh, watching as she made her escape.

That's going to give me nightmares. Armin shuddered.

The Titan roared, chasing after her, and Ilse looked over her shoulder, terrified. "What are you doing?" she cried. "*No good. It's chasing me.*"

Both human and Titan screamed as its fist closed around her. "No!" Ilse screamed, tears flying from her eyes as she was brought to its mouth, fumbling with her pen and notebook. "He has me between its teeth," she sobbed, tears, snot, and spittle running along the side of her face as the Titan bit down on her skull, still scribbling furiously. "I can feel his teeth upon my skull, like the pressure of a—"

Shocked, horrified tears, were pooled in the corners of Krista's eyes. *She kept writing, to the very last moment*.

***Snap!* Ilse's body went limp, pencil and notebook falling from her hands as her arms flopped, blood soaking her cloak and jacket as the music ended with an organ's decrescendo.**

Ymir closed her eyes, exhaling slowly. *I'm sorry*, she thought. She didn't know if her thoughts could reach Ilse—shit, she didn't even know if there was an afterlife. She kind of hoped there wasn't. There was enough Hell in this world, without there being more to suffer after death. Nevertheless, she kept her thoughts flowing. *I'm sorry*, she thought. *Sorry that you died because of me. That your last moments were fear and agony.*

Reiner nudged Annie lightly, nodding in her direction.

The Titan raised its other hand, gripping her torso, tears running down its face, mixing with the blood, as the camera panned down, showing a solitary ray of light on the notebook.

It regrets it, Hange realized, writing that down in big letters and circling it. *But* why*?*

Hange closed the notebook slowly. They sighed, sitting back in their seat, which creaked as they leaned back on its two back legs, placing their hands, folded, on their stomach.

The golden light reflected off the lenses of their glasses as they stared at the ceiling, deep in thought.

I get how they feel, Eren thought. *No*. He frowned, remembering the horrible, snapping noise Ilse's skull had made when it was crushed between the Titan's teeth, her terrified sobs, and the tears dripping to the ground with the blood. *They just read it. We had to* watch *it*.

Their chair landed back on the ground with a small *thump* as they placed the notebook on top of a row of tomes on the side of their desk, held up by a bookend, and reached for a quill, pushing their glasses higher up their nose.

"*Commander Erwin Smith*," their voice narrated as they wrote. "*Subject: Resuming attempts by the Scouting Legion to capture Titans alive*." The camera moved in on the notebook, the scratching of the noise and the quiet music playing in the background.

It's the same tune as when Reiner and Bertolt taught Eren how to use the ODM, Krista realized. *I guess it* does *work for both situations—they're both emotional, but for different reasons. Eren's situation was more sentimental, a bit sad, a bit sweet; our situations is just plain depressing*.

"*A glance through the enclosed notebook makes everything clear*," Hange's letter continued. "*We are still completely ignorant about Titans, I would say.*"

The scene changed, showing Ilse's blood pooling on the ground in the clearing, the notebook lying on the ground near it, fresh bloodstains on the cover. "*The Titan that Ilse Langar met spoke a recognizable language, and appeared to show her respect*." The Titan stood, holding Ilse's headless body carefully in its hands as it walked towards the tree. "*Also, instead of consuming her body, the Titan stored it inside a hole in a tree*." The Titan placed the body inside the hole, carefully arranging her limbs before moving away.

The hole was a lot bigger back then, Erwin thought. *Give it a few more months, and it might have been completely covered. We might never have found the body, or the notebook.* He was both amused and horrified at the thought of some poor, unsuspecting lumberjack cutting down the tree only to find the skeleton in the trunk. *Then, I guess, we, in a way, should be thanking Hange for running off*.

"*This seems to be a reasonable assumption*." The Titan knelt before the hole, looking at the body, torso slumped against the inside of the trunk, eyes heavy with remorse. "*Although this is obvious, such a case is a first in the history of all mankind*."

Why did the Titan store the body? Jean wondered. *And what did 'Ymir' mean to it?* He shook his head. *Too many questions, not nearly enough answers*.

Erwin looked up from a sheaf of papers as the door of his office opened, Hange walking in. "*We have a responsibility to make use of the information Ilse gave us,*" Hange's voice narrated as they placed the package on his desk. "*Recording it to the last moments of her life*."

Quite literally. Hange bit their lip a little, remembering the dark spots on the final page of the notebook and the pencil mark suddenly veering off the page. They smiled sadly. *Thank you, Ilse*.

Erwin looked up at them, and they looked back, meeting his gaze. They raised their fist, the light of the setting sun reflecting off their glasses rendering their eyes invisible as they saluted, nodding at him before walking away stiffly.

Hange walked down the street, past a small store, where Petra and Oluo stood, Petra, standing at the counter, chatting with the shopkeeper, Oluo, standing by, a bag slung over his shoulder. "*We cannot let the effort she put in toward finding some truth behind the Titans go to waste*." Oluo glanced over his shoulder as they passed, Petra turning to look as well. Levi stood behind them, looking over a broom with a critical gaze.

A few people chuckled at the image—surprisingly heartwarming after the depressing, gory episode they'd just watched.

"*We* have *to continue it*." Hange walked up a set of stairs at the back of the alley, knocking on a heavy wooden door. The door was answered by a dark-haired man, frowning at the sight of the soldier.

"Is that Ilse's father?" Krista asked. Hange nodded wordlessly.

"*No matter how little intel we get on such missions. . .*" Hange sat at the table with Mr. Langar, Mrs. Langar standing behind him, watching as they open up a package they'd placed on the table.

"*It will not be in vain*." Mrs. Langar's hands flew to her chest as Mr. Langar reached forwards with shaky hands, taking the bloody cloak Hange handed to him. Mrs. Langar buried her face in her hands, shoulders shaking as she began to sob.

"That must have been horrible," Connie said quietly.

Hange shrugged, saying the same sentence that he feared he, himself, would be saying all too often, all too soon: "You get used to it."

"*I firmly believe that it will play an important part in humanity's fight against the Titans*." Hange reached into their jacket, pulling out the small, brown notebook. They closed their eyes, holding it, for a moment before reaching forwards, offering it to the Langars.

"That was really nice of you," Krista said.

Hange shrugged. "Well, we'd gotten the information we needed. It belonged to her parents, and it was the right thing to do."

"You could have kept it, though," Jean said. "You wanted to."

Hange wavered for a second before chuckling. "Damn." They shook their head, grinning. "You guys are too nice, you know that?"

"*Second Squad Leader*," Hange signed off. "*Hange Zoë*."

Hange walked out of the Langars' courtyard, head down. "Huh?" They glanced up. Levi, Petra, and Oluo stood in front of them, Levi leaning against a wall, arms crossed, Petra, standing near him, a bag slung over one shoulder, and Oluo, head bowed, a larger sack and Levi's broom on his back.

"Making the subordinates carry all the stuff, are you?" Hange joked.

"Yes," Levi deadpanned, eyes never leaving the screen.

"Um, Squad Leader Hange," the light-haired man said nervously.

"You stalking me?" they asked, putting their hands on their hips as they walked forwards, light flashing off their glasses. "Well," they shrugged casually. "I guess everybody needs a hobby."

"I have literally never been more scared in my life," Connie whispered. "And I've almost died about a hundred times."

Oluo lowered his head, a bead of sweat on his face. "I'm sorry about last time," he said. "If not for my mistake, we might have captured it." He bit his lip. "And it might have helped mankind. If I have to give my life for that, it's not too high of a price—"

Eld elbowed him sharply. "You're stupid," he informed him.

Hange's hands shot forwards, grabbing the straps of Oluo's bag, dragging him until they were face-to-face. They lowered their head, eyes remorseful. "No," they said as Oluo made a small, choking noise.

Laughter erupted throughout the room. "This, again?" Jean snorted.

"Poor guy," Eren chuckled, shaking his head.

"He just doesn't get a break, huh?" Mike grinned.

"I'm the one who should apologize. I nearly got you killed." Petra and Levi watched, quiet. "I'm sorry," they apologized. "But never say that your life is cheap again."

"As meaningful as that speech was," Armin said. "I think it's probably something you should say when you're *not* strangling him half to death."

They looked up at him, smiling sadly. "Understand?" Their eyes widened. "Huh?"

The whites of Oluo's eyes were showing, eyes rolled back in his head, drool and sweat running down his face, tongue clenched between his teeth.

The laughter resumed in tenfold. Oluo flushed, scowling.

Hange let out a shocked yell, dropping the man. A spray of blood flew up as he collided with the ground.

"Did he bite his tongue again?!"

"Hey, are you okay?" they cried, a cheerful, rock tune staring up as the camera moved over the roofs of the town, smoke rising from chimneys.

"Somehow," Jean laughed, "he still is."

"Oluo!" Petra yelled. "What the hell are you doing?"

The windows of the streets began lighting up, candles and lanterns being lit inside the houses, as the group of soldiers walked back to headquarters. "By the way," Levi said, Petra and Oluo walking behind him, Petra looking, annoyed, at Oluo, Oluo rubbing his cheek. "Erwin's come to a decision."

Hange blinked, tilting their head slightly. "I see," they said. A grin tugged at their lips and they raised their fists, a delighted blush flooding their cheeks. "Hooray!" they cried, leaping into the air.

A few people laughed, and Mike patted Hange genially on the back.

"*Twenty days later*," the narrator said as the camera began rising into the air, away from the four soldiers. "*Squad Leader Hange gained the support of the Special Operations Squad, led by Captain Levi, and succeeded in organizing the first ever expedition beyond Wall Maria to capture a Titan*." In the pink-and-purple sky, a single star twinkled.

"You agreed to it?" Armin asked, surprised. "Sir," he added quickly as Levi glanced at him.

Levi shrugged. "I trust Erwin's judgement," he said simply.

"*For that mission. . .*" An image of four Titans trapped in a net was shown, Scouts with spears surrounding them. "*A new method of capture, proposed by Squad Leader Hange, was used, and not a single human life was lost*."

Cheers and applause rang throughout the room. Hange beamed, standing up and taking a sweeping bow.

Levi poked Erwin's arm. "Well?" he asked quietly. "What do you think?"

Erwin watched the screen as the ending began playing, brow furrowed in thought. "Well, we didn't learn anything else about the Titan," he said. "But there was something else. . ."

Levi narrowed his eyes. "Ymir?"

Erwin nodded. "Keep an eye on her, will you?"

"Roger."

OVA – 3.75. Distress

Slow, ominous music played as the scene faded onto the screen, rays of sun breaking through the branches of the trees as the camera looked into the sky, clouds drifting by in the deep blue sky, tinged purple by the sunset.

Hange furrowed their brows, leaning forwards. "What's this?"

"I'm guessing this one's not gonna be that relaxing," Mike muttered.

Owls hooted as the camera panned over the forest, pine trees clinging onto rocky cliffs and dry dirt.

"Maybe it's another scare?" Sasha suggested hesitantly. "You know—like Jean's episode?"

Jean shook his head slowly, purposely shoving the memory of the embarrassing episode away. "No," he said. "I think I recognize that place."

"Yeah!" Eren's eyes widened. "Look: those mountains, and that forest—"

"Oh!" Armin exclaimed. "Do you think it's *that* exercise. . ?"

"What exercise?" Moblit asked, to no avail.

"*As intended*. . ." A lopsided wheel turned, rocking on its axle. "*The exercise wasn't supposed to be that difficult*."

"Oh, yeah," Connie said. "It's *definitely* that exercise."

"What exercise?" Erwin asked. He didn't remember any activities that had taken place in a place like the forest on screen from when he was in cadets.

"Must have been added after you graduated," Mike said.

Sweat rolled down Eren's face as he and Jean stood, muscles tensed, fists clenched, expressions darkened and hidden in shadow, the Shifter's uniform torn and face bruised.

Moblit and Hange exchanged alarmed looks. Levi frowned.

Light flashed, reflected off of a curved blade, covered in spots of dried mud, held up to the neck of a blonde girl in a Cadet's uniform. Sasha, Connie, Armin, and Mina stood behind Eren, staring in shock and horror. "*If we'd left the forest, eventually, everyone would come back*."

Levi's frown deepened at the sight of the curved blade, and Petra inhaled sharply.

"What's going on?" she asked. "This—I mean, there's no way this is a *relaxing* episode, right?"

"If anything," Mike muttered, "I'm pretty sure it's gonna give us all a few extra grey hairs."

The girl was revealed to be Krista, hands bound, held tightly in the grip of a dark-haired man in a red vest, trimmed with gold, an upturned wagon behind them.

A few of the recruits grimaced at the memory of the event, and more than a couple of the veterans let out small, surprised gasps.

Ymir whirled around to stare at Krista, eyes dark and accusing, almost angry. "You never told me about that," she hissed.

"It wasn't important," Krista said quietly, skin prickling slightly as she looked at the screen.

"Bull*shit*. How is *that* not important—"

"Ymir." The dark-haired girl's eyebrows shot up at the blonde's tone—so much heavier and. . . well, *darker*, than anything that had ever left her lips. "It was *fine*."

"That's—"

"We can talk later." The blonde's voice—normally light and warm, but, now, cold and leaving no room for argument. The brunette grudgingly turned back to the TV.

The exchanged hadn't gone unnoticed, and more than a few gazes from the front of the room we locked on the girls.

"*That*. . ." Eren clenched his teeth, eyes bright with fury and helplessness. "*Was our only instruction*." The camera closed in on Eren's eye, pupil contracted in rage, bright with an insane, almost murderous, light. "*Was our only instruction*." The music reached a startling crescendo before cutting off, the screen turning black.

"What happened during the exercise?" Eld demanded, turning around in his seat to look at the recruits.

Marco opened his mouth to reply, but was cut off as Connie flapped his arms, making a series of spitting, hissing noises. "*Shh*!" he finally managed to get out. The others stared at him. "What?" he asked. "They already know we all make it out fine. We didn't get to know what happened during the last OVA, so let's make them wait, too!"

"Oh, come on!" Gunther protested. "If nothing's gonna happen, then shouldn't we know?"

"You know what?" Jean grinned mischievously. "I kinda like the idea of that!"

"Yeah!" Sasha said. "Let them react in real time!"

"That's ridiculous," Oluo said. "It's just another silly training exercise, so I don't get why you're making such a big deal—*urk!*"

Levi rolled his eyes as Eld muffled Oluo's screams with a napkin. "Let's just watch the damn episode."

Seven horses galloped through a dry, barren patch of desert, kicking up clouds of dust behind them as they rode past scraggly, withered vegetation and mountainous, sun-baked boulders.

"I've never seen that place, before," Petra said, furrowing her brows. "It looks. . . weird."

"Really different from everywhere else in the Walls," Moblit agreed, nodding.

"It's just north of the camp," Armin explained. "I don't think people ever even went there before the exercise was established."

"Got it." Eld nodded.

"*This time*," Armin glanced up from his clipboard, hair bouncing with every movement his horse made. "*We, the 104th Training Corps—*"

"We?" Eren asked. "So, this is Armin speaking, not the narrator?"

"It's so confusing," Jean grumbled, scratching his head. "I mean, they sound the exact same!"

I do wonder about that. Erwin glanced at Armin. *Why would that be?*

Eren rode next to Armin, Mina and Sasha a little ways behind them, Marco in the lead. "—*were split into two groups*." Krista and Jean rode at the back of the group, bringing up the rear.

"Is that all of you?" Mike asked, slightly surprised. "I kind of expected—I don't know. More people, I guess?"

"It was optional," Eren explained. "A lot of the new exercises were."

"I didn't even know there *were* new exercises," Moblit said. "Why did they add them? They've been practically unchanged for the past century."

"I'm guessing it was because of. . . well, Wall Maria." Armin glanced at Eren as he spoke. "They added a bunch of extra, wilderness survival activities that you could take part in for extra credit."

"That makes sense." Gunther nodded.

The scene vanished, replaced with a diagram, mountain ranges and cacti sketched in, the Cadets' Camp draw in the corner, surrounded by barbed wire.

Erwin gave the diagram a once-over. "It looks like somebody drew it," he said.

Hange nodded. "It's a lot different from the ones we've seen before," they commented.

"There're probably a bunch of different styles of diagrams," Moblit reasoned. "Since this is being shown from Armin's point of view—I'm assuming—this is probably his style."

"Makes sense."

"*We were to make a round trip to our target location and record our progress within a given time period*," the narrator explained as seven horses departed from the camp, followed by a red arrow. They vanished as they neared the mountains, where a medal had been drawn, and reappeared in a different area, galloping back to camp, bringing the medal with them.

"Why's there a medal?" Sasha asked. "There wasn't a medal when we did it."

"Maybe it's symbolic," Marco said. "You know—it might be representing the fact that we made it there?"

"*The journey to the destination goes on for about forty kilometres*." An image of a simple map appeared, spotted with forests and mountains, the Wall on the far right of the landscape, a small village on either side. A red star was on the map, near a smaller forest.

It sounds simple enough, Erwin thought. *Just a quick round trip, shouldn't take more than a day*. He furrowed his brow, remembering the man with the knife at the beginning of the episode. *Unless something went wrong, that is*.

Armin scribbled on the clipboard as the group continued riding towards the mountains. "*Marco was our group leader, while I was in charge of record-keeping*."

Him? Mike glanced at the dark-haired boy. *Huh*.

Another image appeared, showing Thomas, Mikasa, Reiner, Bertolt, Daz, and Annie riding along a cliff path on the side of a mountain, another cadet in the background. "*The team on the other side was led by Thomas, with Mikasa as the record-keeper*." Mikasa stared down at her clipboard, evidently uninterested, while Daz sneezed, spewing spittle to the side.

"Oh," Hange said. "So that's where the others were?"

"Why the two paths, though?" Moblit asked. "I mean, wouldn't that mean the difficulty of the trip was different for the two of you?" While he'd never done the exercise before, he was fairly certain that riding a horse on the side of a mountain was a lot harder than riding one across a flat plain.

"After we met up, we were supposed to take the other paths back home," Mikasa said. "So we would have gone by the desert, and they would have taken the cliff path."

"You were supposed to," Mike noticed. "So the trouble happened before you met up?" Mikasa nodded.

The camera panned over the top of the forest, trees thinning out before coming to a full stop where the desert began, sun beating down on the green foliage. "*Both teams set out at the same time, and proceeded towards the huge forest*."

The map appeared again, and two red arrows stretched from the red star towards a patch of mountains, surrounded by a ring of forest. "*We were to trade information at the target location and return to the starting point, completing a loop*." Two groups of horses galloped along the path laid out by the arrows, meeting at the mountains before turning and heading back to the star.

"What information?" Moblit asked.

"Little things," Armin said. "Terrain, areas to avoid, that kind of stuff."

"Got it."

Armin looked away from his clipboard, glancing over his shoulder. "*The objective of this exercise was to evaluate everyone's ability to sustain themselves in the absence of a crisis*." Connie's head was tilted back, bobbing as his horse galloped, mouth hanging open, eyes glazed over; Sasha looked miserable, sweat on her cheeks, lips parted and downturned; Jean was at the very back of the group, a hand over his mouth as he yawned.

Laughter rang through the room. Sasha turned red, covering her face, and Jean groaned.

"Come on!" he protested. "It wasn't like you guys were exactly enthusiastic about it, either!"

"I guess travelling without any immediate danger or goal *is* pretty boring," Petra chuckled. *That doesn't mean they shouldn't be alert, anyways. You should always keep an eye on your surroundings*—especially *outside the Walls.* This had to be at least a year ago—she could only hope that they'd developed a more vigilant attitude by now.

"*That's all!*" A flashback to the camp appeared, and Shadis stepped forwards, addressing the recruits. "Straightforward and simple." The map that had been on screen earlier was hanging behind him, the sea of recruits in front. "It could be thought this training is one that even you cowards could easily pass, but it's not!"

"Charming," Levi muttered dryly. Hange smacked his foot.

Annie, Jean, Marco, and Connie stood in the front row, Jean smirking confidently while Marco and Connie looked serious, and Annie, bored. "In any situation, do not forget your will to fight! Emergency or not, a soldier is always a soldier!"

Connie shook his head. "Never thought we'd actually have to take that advice," he muttered.

Sasha nodded. "The way he was talking, it was almost like he was expecting something to go wrong."

"It's Shadis," Jean chimed in. "He think something'll go wrong if we pick up a spoon the wrong way."

"Still." Eren had heard the conversation, and decided to add his own commentary. "It was pretty specific. What do you think, Armin?"

"Hm?" Armin glanced up. "Oh, yeah. . ." He thought back to the suspicions he'd had after seeing Shadis's reaction to the paper. "I mean. . . it's possible."

The other cadets watched, listening carefully. "Don't succumb to peaceful boredom! Never stop exercising your hands and feet!" Armin's brow was furrowed, eyes set as he listened. "This training is also a battle! Do not forget that!"

"I think I agree with the kids," Mike said quietly. "The old man's being pretty damn specific."

"That doesn't mean he knew something would happen, though," Hange said. "I mean, for all we know, he could just be calling out the lazy ones."

"True," Mike chuckled.

"Yes, sir!" Eren glared ahead, expression fierce as he shouted with the other cadets.

"No need to be so angry about it," Jean snorted. "It was just an exercise. Suicidal Bastard," he added, scoffing.

"Not sure if you remember," Eren snapped, temper flaring, "but I was the only one who actually *did* something—"

"Yeah, something *stupid*—"

"Can you just tell us what happens?" Eld asked Sasha, speaking over the argument.

"Nope!" Sasha grinned, shaking her head as Mikasa slapped the back of Eren's head, shutting him up. "But, hey!" she added as Eld opened his mouth to argue. "We all got out fine, remember?"

"Doesn't make it any less stressful," Gunther grumbled.

The horses moved at a slow, casual pace through the desert, hooves clicking against the stones on the path. "So. . ." Marco turned to glance at the others. "We're not allowed to rush?"

"So, they basically sent you on a leisure trip," Eld said. "What for? Just to see how well you could focus?"

"Well," Oluo said snobbily, sniffing loudly. "Concentration's *very* important, if you want to be a soldier, and, *clearly*, these brats just *can't*—"

"Dude." Gunther shoved the box of tissues into the other man's face. "Just. . . don't."

"He is right, though," Petra said grudgingly. "You need to be able to pay attention and stay attentive—"

"Especially in the Scouts," Hange added. "If you drift off for a moment outside the Walls, well, then. . ." They trailed off and made a chomping motion.

"Focus. Got it," Connie squeaked.

"R—Right," Armin responded.

"We'd also be stupid if we did," Jean said. "We can take our time."

"Also true," Mike said.

"Still, you shouldn't have been so lax about it," Eld said.

"You're just saying that because we know something's going to happen," Gunther pointed out. "I mean, personally, if it were me, then I don't think I would have paying much attention, either."

"You don't know your lower limit," Eren called over his shoulder. "Jean, if you're going to take it slow, then I'm going ahead." He nudged his horse's flanks, trotting ahead.

"Wasn't the whole point of the exercise *to* take it slow?" Hange asked.

"Classic Eren," Connie sighed.

"What a hothead." Sasha shook her head, ignoring Eren's put-out sputtering.

"Wait, Eren. . ." Armin began.

"But—!" Marco held a hand up, frowning. "The formation of the group. . ." He frowned, looking up. "What do we do, Jean?" he asked.

He's too hesitant, Erwin thought. *From what I've seen, it looks like his heart's in the right place, but he just doesn't seem assertive enough to be a proper leader*.

He turned immediately to Jean, Hange noted. *Either they're just really close, and he's used to asking for his opinion, or Jean's a good leader. But we haven't seen nearly enough of either of them to determine which it is*.

"Like I care!" Jean scowled, a bead of sweat on his cheek. "Extra effort here won't get me into the Military Police."

"Is that all you care about?" Eld asked.

"Yes," Connie answered for him. "It's also all he would talk about."

"It's like Eren and Titans," Sasha added, much to both boys' indignance (Eren, at the suggestion that his completely righteous anger was annoying, and Jean, at the injustice of being compared to Eren). "Except Jean shouts less, and he's not nearly as hot-headed."

"Hey!"

"My point exactly."

"That's not true. . ." Marco protested.

Mike nodded. "You said this exercise was for extra credit, right?" A few recruits nodded. "So it *would* have gotten you into the Military Police, wouldn't it?"

Jean frowned. "I *guess*."

"In any case," Marco turned forwards, "let's get on with the exercise."

"It's useless," Jean reiterated.

"Yeah, we get it," Annie muttered.

"Hey," Eren said. "Hurry up, will you? Don't you have any endurance for this?"

"It doesn't matter if I'm complaining," Jean shot back.

"And I thought the arguing *before* was bad," Eld muttered, rubbing his forehead. "How long had you two known each other at this point?"

"About a year," Eren said.

"Oh," Hange said. "So this was two years ago, right?"

"Yeah."

"It would be great if time passed faster, in that case," Connie grumbled.

A few people laughed, shouting their agreement. Jean flushed.

"You got that right," Mina sighed. "We have a long road ahead of us."

Mina. . . Armin squeezed his eyes shut, the memory of watching her die, helpless, playing on a loop behind his eyelids.

Eren nudged his shoulder. "Hey," he said quietly. "You good?"

No. Armin glanced up at him, smiling faintly. "Yeah. Yeah, I'm fine."

Jean scowled, furrowing his brows and looking down. "This is tiresome."

The other group was gathered in a small, flat area between two looming walls of stone on either side, small bushes and patches of grass scattered amongst the rock shelves, sitting around on smaller boulders and reading maps, or simply waiting around tending to their horses. "If that's true," Thomas was saying," then we may not be able to get there before nightfall."

"If what's true?" Sasha asked.

"Nothing important," Mikasa said. "We took a wrong turn, and were trying to figure it out."

"Then," Mikasa suggested, "maybe we should head eastward a little?"

“On the other hand, it may also be too shady.” The pair stood a little bit to the side of the other group, reading over the map in Mikasa’s hands. She glanced up as Thomas tipped his head back, taking a long swig from his waterskin.

Sasha bit her lip, thinking back to her first time meeting Krista, when the other girl had offered her her waterskin. *Why am I thinking about that right now? Is it just the waterskin? Or maybe just memories of simpler times?* Seeing the dead cadets in the earlier episodes had been hard enough, but the knowledge that they were living safe, happy lives in other words had been a small comfort. Now, though. . . *Seeing them on screen, messing around with the rest of us, not even knowing that they’re living on borrowed time*. . . It was like a punch to the gut.

The dark-haired girl’s eyes suddenly widened and she whipped her head around as a rushing noise blew past her.

“Huh?” A few people straightened, eyes widening.

“What was that?” Jean asked.

A bird twittered, shooting away, the branches above them shaking as it took flight. Thomas lowered the skin, frowning at her. “What is it, Mikasa?” he asked.

“Woah!” Sasha’s eyes widened. “Even I wouldn’t be able to hear that!”

“I didn’t hear it,” Mikasa explained. “It was like. . . I don’t know. A feeling. Instincts.”

“That’s amazing!” Connie gasped.

It is, Erwin thought. *I don’t think I’ve ever met anybody else like—actually*. . . He glanced at Levi, who’s own gaze was fixed on the dark-haired recruit. *I have*.

Mikasa blinked, staring blankly ahead for a second before turning back to the map, expression blank. “It’s nothing,” she said. “It’s just me. . .”

“You’re not going to tell anyone?” Armin asked, surprised.

Mikasa shrugged. “It was just a bird,” she said. “How was I supposed to guess that it had been startled by something else?” *But*. . . she furrowed her brow as another thought weaseled its way into her brain. *If I had told someone. . . would it have helped? Maybe we could have checked up on the other group, and our gear wouldn’t have been stolen*. Logically, she knew that, even with her reputation as the best soldier in the group (she wasn’t even saying it to brag—it was just the truth, and everybody knew it), the others wouldn’t have risked putting the entire exercise off—and for a *bird*, nonetheless. *Still. . . if we’d gotten there first, then maybe Eren wouldn’t have been hurt*.

Reiner, a towel slung around his neck, lowered his own waterskin, glanced over at her, Bertolt, his jacket tied around his waist, and Annie looking over at her as well.

What’s with the looks? Armin wondered, glancing behind him. The three were watching the screen fixatedly—almost ridiculously so. *But*, he frowned. *I could’ve sworn they were looking at each other when I turned around*.

A lizard scampered across the rocky floor, feet slapping against stone. "Jeez. . ." Jean was slumped over, glaring at his horse's mane as they trotted through the desert, shadows from the hoodoos looming over them. "That lizard's joining us on the same route, huh. . ."

Eld whistled. "That is one massive lizard."

"*Yeah*." For some reason, Sasha shot Eren a withering look.

"It's rare to see that," Marco commented.

"They're delicious, you know!" Sasha informed the others.

The others glanced over at her. "What?" Krista asked.

"My reaction, exactly," Oluo said.

"You've had lizard before?" Petra asked. "But you're from a mountain village, right?"

"Uh—" Sasha moistened her lips, smiling nervously. "Well, yeah. But we went on hunting trips, sometimes."

"They really are!" Sasha said, smiling cheerfully. "My family and I used to eat them," she explained. "They taste like chicken."

"Then why not just have chicken?" Eren asked, confused. "Why go out of your way to get the lizard?"

"Really, Eren," Sasha sighed, shaking her head. "You might spend all your time shouting about Titans, but there's not much you really get, is there?"

"Huh?"

"No taste for fine cuisine." Jean sniffed.

"You can cook?" Jean smirked.

"Oh, yeah," Mike said. "This is before *The Curse of a Tormented Youth*, right?"

"Of course I can! Piece of cake!"

"As he'll soon learn," Connie said, grinning.

Jean rolled his eyes. "I won that competition, remember? Or do you have some kind of selective memory?"

"You *cheated!*" Sasha retorted. "That was your mom's omelette, not yours! Plus, Pixis said that mine was better!"

"When did he say that—"

"'Midnight snack', he said, 'midnight snack'—!"

"Let's not have this conversation again," Levi grumbled.

Jean grinned, lowering himself over his horse's neck. "All right, then!"

"Oh, no," Petra said. "What are you going to do?" She turned to the others. "What's he going to do?"

He kicked the horse's flanks and it took off, galloping after the lizard. "H—Hey!" Marco yanked at his own horse's reins, drawing it to a stop.

"You're chasing the lizard?" Mike stared at the screen.

“Buddy. . .” Eld gaped at him. “You. . . you do remember you’re on a military training exercise, right?”

Jean glanced over his shoulder, grinning mischievously. “If hunting for food’s part of the exercise, then what’s better than getting that lizard?!” he called.

“But they gave us food. . .” Marco said quietly, trailing off.

“Oh, sweet Sina.” Petra plopped her face in her hands.

“Don’t do that!” Krista cried, distraught.

“Listen to her!” Sasha shouted.

“I’m going ahead,” Eren said, snapping his reins and taking off after the other boy.

“Oh, Rose,” Gunther groaned.

The lizard pitter-pattered among the path as Jean chased after it. He snickered, drawing his blades. The horse’s hooves pounded against the ground as they neared the lizard and he grinned, raising his swords. “Gotcha!”

“You’re gonna butcher it!” Sasha protested.

“Didn’t you just get a speech from Shadis about focusing?” Hange asked.

“Come on!” Jean defended himself. “They put a bunch of thirteen-year olds and sent them off into the wild for twenty-four hours with a bunch of horses and swords. Did you think we’d *actually* behave?”

“It’s the military,” Levi said. “You *should* have.”

There was a clang of metal on metal and Jean reeled back, shocked. The lizard stared up at the two swords crossed over it, blades shaking slightly, before turning and skittering off. Eren held his sword below Jean’s until the reptile had vanished before tugging it away, metal screeching as the blades dragged against each other. Both horses whinnied as their owners tugged the reins, facing each other.

“Well, at least *someone* stopped you,” Levi huffed. Eren puffed up proudly, shooting Jean a smug look.

“Don’t encourage this,” Sasha sighed.

“What are you doing?” Jean demanded, furious.

“This isn’t a game!” Eren shouted back.

“While I admire your dedication,” Erwin said. “Shouting and arguing isn’t going to get you to your destination any better.” Both boys turned red at the Commander’s simple reprimand.

“They really don’t know how to communicate in any other way,” Armin said.

Well, Erwin thought. *I guess we’re going to have to fix that*.

“We don’t even have an instructor!” Jean yelled, slashing his blade through the air for extra emphasis. “This training won’t get us anywhere!” The rest of the group watched, frowning.

“That doesn’t mean you shouldn’t focus on your task,” Moblit said.

“And, besides,” Eld pointed out. “The entire point of the exercise was to see how you’d fare in a situation where you weren’t being monitored, or in immediate danger.”

“Well, I guess he’s failing, then,” Ymir muttered. Krista nodded wordlessly, and the older girl frowned.

Marco dismounted, landing on the ground and walking towards them. “Stop it!” he pleaded.

“You’re acting like brats!” Connie chimed in.

“You know, when *Connie* says that, it’s true,” Sasha said. Jean and Eren both scowled, and Connie made a noise of indinance.

Jean whipped around to glare at him, attention momentarily removed from Eren. “I don’t want to hear that from *you!*” he snapped.

Connie crossed his arms, glaring at Jean, who shrugged. “What? It’s true.”

“Jean!” Marco glared up at him as he stopped by his horse. “Get a hold of yourself!”

He’s not assertive enough, Erwin thought. *If not for that, his calm attitude and people skills would have made him a decent leader*.

The brunets looked at him. “That’s not important right now!” Jean said.

“If we delay,” Marco said, frowning, “it’ll have to be reported! Please, don’t record this yet, Armin,” he added, turning to the blond.

Marco flushed as a few veterans glanced at him. “It wasn’t cheating!” he said quickly. “It was just a little chat during the ride!”

Mike chuckled. “Whatever you say, kid.”

“G—Got it.”

“Write down:” Jean said, “Jean Kirschtein tries to find food during the exercise, but gets interrupted by Eren Jaeger.”

“Well, that’s not a *complete* lie,” Petra muttered.

Eren’s head shot up and he glared at him. “What did you say?!” he demanded.

“It’s delicious!” Sasha’s mouth moved as she screeched, and Jean started.

“Uh. . .” Moblit blinked. “Okay.”

Everybody turned to stare at her as a breeze blew by, dust clouds billowing into the air. Sasha’s eyes were wide, cheeks puffed out as she glared ahead, a drop of sweat on her face.

“I mean,” Gunther said as Sasha tilted her chin up, expression matching the one she bore on screen. “I guess that ended the argument.”

“What is *wrong* with this class?” Levi muttered.

Marco sighed, looking down. “Let’s go,” he said, resigned.

“O—” Jean looked back at him. “Okay.” Jean’s horse trotted away as Marco headed back to his own steed. Armin and Mina followed after the rest of the group, leaving Sasha behind, holding a finger up to her chin

“Given its size, it could’ve fed all of us. . .” Sasha said quietly.

“Don’t tell me you’re going to be talking about that all episode!” Oluo exclaimed.

“Surprisingly,” Eren said. “No.”

“Hey!” Sasha cried. “You’re the one that kept me from catching it!”

Crows cawed as the next scene faded onto the black screen, the orange light of the setting sun flooding the dry forest. “Are you sure?” Mikasa and Daz knelt on the ground next to a patch of grass at the foot of the tree, Reiner, Bertolt and Thomas standing around them, another cadet kneeling on the ground, looking through the supplies.

“Ah,” Jean said. “So this is where the trouble starts.”

“Oh,” Mike looked at him. “Is this when that knife dude comes into play?”

“Not yet,” Eren said. “Soon.”

“Are you really going to be keeping us in the dark the whole time?” Hange asked.

“It’s only fair!” Connie defended. “You didn’t tell us about the Talking Titan!”

“Well, you didn’t tell us the outcome of the cooking battle, either,” Gunther said.

“Just shut it, all of you,” Levi muttered, tugging at a strand of hair, scowling in annoyance. “The longer you badger them, the longer we’re stuck watching this bullshit.”

“There’s no doubt about it.” Daz’s eyes were wide, teeth gritted and sweat rolling down his face. “This is where we put it!” The cadets stared down at the ground, Bertolt and Thomas looking worried, Mikasa, expressionless, and Reiner, brows furrowed, eyes hard.

“What is it?” Hange asked. “What did you lose?”

Erwin frowned, racking his brains. *What?* he wondered. *What* didn’t *they have?*

Levi narrowed his eyes at the screen, scanning the cadets. *Sleeping bags in the background: check. Supplies: check. Gear*. . . His eyes widened fractionally. *Oh*.

“Our maneuver gear’s gone. . .” Thomas said, worrying his lower lip.

“How. . ?” Mike muttered.

Almost everybody in the room turned to look at either Mikasa or the trio in the back of the room.

“We took it off when we went off the gather firewood,” Reiner explained. “It was heavy, and it was a lot easier to gather everything without it clanking around everywhere.”

“But,” Moblit said, “didn’t you leave anybody to watch it?”

Mikasa frowned. “We didn’t expect anybody else to be in the woods,” she said. “The nearest village was almost a mile away, and who would have gone that deep in the woods alone?”

“That’s not a good enough reason,” Erwin said frowning. “A soldier should never leave their gear unattended. Well,” he sighed, turning back to the screen, “it doesn’t matter anymore. As long as it doesn’t happen while you’re in the Corps.”

Mikasa’s jaw locked as she nodded stiffly.

“Over here.” The five looked over at Annie, who stood to the side, a bundle of wood under one arm. She tilted her head, and the others followed her to where a campfire had been set up, blackened, charred wood surrounded by a ring of ash-covered rocks.

Mike’s eyebrows nearly rocketed up to the ceiling. “They had the time to set up a *campfire*?”

“That’s so *weird*,” Moblit said. “How. . ?”

Reiner knelt next to it, touching the wood gingerly with the tip of a finger. “They’ve been gone for quite a while,” he deduced.

“It’s the same as what we found over there,” Mikasa said, watching Reiner as he picked up a piece of wood, turning it over in his fingers for her to see, leaving black streaks all over his hand. “How many people are involved?”

“Do you think that they were waiting there, but left when the cadets arrived?” Hange asked.

“That would make sense.” Erwin nodded. “If the cadets were tired enough, and the thieves were fast and quiet enough, they could have vanished without anybody noticing.”

“That could have also been what startled that bird Ackerman noticed earlier,” Mike said.

“Also. . .” The pair looked up at the sound of Annie’s voice. “Over here, too.” Their boots rustled against the dry dirt of the forest floor as they rushed over to where she stood.

“Carriage tracks. . .” Criss-crossing lines had been dug into the earth by rickety wheels, hoofprints pressed into the ground between them.

“And there’s a few of them. . .”

“Wagons?” Levi raised an eyebrow.

“There’s no way they managed to wheel those in without the recruits noticing,” Moblit decided.

“Which means that the wagons were already in place—hidden out of sight from the campfire—when the cadets appeared,” Hange said.

Annie stood in between the carriage tracks, on top of the hoofprints “There’s no information about residents inhabiting this area,” she said quietly.

“You said the closest village was ages away, right?” Mike asked. Mikasa nodded. “Then they weren’t just there by accident.”

“Do you think that they somehow got tipped off about the exercise?” Eld suggested.

“That’s actually pretty likely.” Hange frowned, contemplating the screen. “Did you ever find out?” They directed the question to the recruits.

Eren shook his head. “The MPs took them away,” he said, “but they never told us about what happened to them, or their sentences.”

“It’s probably a gang of thieves.” The others turned to Reiner as he began speaking. “It seems they found out where the weapons were placed, and stole them during the night,” he reasoned. “They gather ODM equipment and make black market deals.”

Though they remained facing the TV, Mike and Erwin's gazes flicked over to Levi. The young man's skin prickled as he felt the gazes of the taller blonds burning into him. He jerked his chin in a small, but unmistakable, nod.

Daz let out a horrified gasp, eyes widening. "So we're being targeted?" Thomas asked.

"If the thieves really were tipped off about the exercise," Gunther contemplated, "then that means there was mole in the camp, right?"

"Maybe," Moblit said. "Or, maybe, they have friends or relatives in the camp, and it was leaked by accident."

Mikasa looked back down at the tracks. "If they got caught, we would have been helpless to stop them." She looked at the others. "You should probably be happy that you're still alive."

Connie shuddered. *Does she have to be so fatalistic?* He paused, frowning as he remembered the carnage they'd seen on screen during the Fall of Shinganshina. *No. . . I guess she's got her own reasons, huh?*

Thomas gulped. "Should we stop the training and report this?" he asked.

Should they? Hange wondered. *The activity hardly matters, now, since they've lost their gear, and both answers have pros and cons: if they turn back and report the theft, then they ensure that people are out there looking, but they also risk letting the thieves get away; on the flip side, since the gear's not crucial to the exercise, they can keep going, and even warn the other group, just in case the thieves find them, too*.

"No," Reiner said, Thomas turning to look at him. "Our target's right ahead of us. Speed up the exercise, tell Marco and his team about this, and then get them back to the training grounds."

Hange nodded. *No, it is*.

Mikasa nodded. She turned as a breeze blew past, whipping her hair and scarf about. The camera closed in on her face, eyes somehow both dark and bright, contemplative, before panning up, following the dry leaves that rustled as they billowed in the air, vanishing into the forest.

It's kind of like the ending, Sasha thought. *What with the wind and her hair, and all that.*

The desert mountains were dark, silhouetted in purple, the sky a canvas of colours behind them, the light of the setting sun, white glow just barely visible over the lower peaks, dyeing the sky a myriad of colours, from yellow to deep blue.

"I kind of want to go there," Petra said quietly. "It's not much during the day, but the sunset really is amazing."

A fire crackled inside a ring of stones, stew bubbling in a small metal pot set up on a rickety tripod over the flames.

"The lizard would have tasted so much better than the rations," Sasha grumbled, much to the amusement of those sitting around her.

"So this is what squad supplies taste like. . ." The horses were tied to trees a little way away from the fires, saddles off, nibbling at the sparse, dry grasses. Jean played with the wrapper of a ration bar, scowling.

"It would've been better if we'd caught the lizard," Sasha said, taking a mouthful of stew.

A few people laughed as the on-screen Sasha all but repeated the real life version.

"Dumbass," Levi grumbled. *It might not taste good, but that's no excuse to waste food*. His scowl deepened. *Would've thought a walking stomach would know* that*, at least*.

"Enough." Eren, Connie, and Mina, sat around fire, Armin, Jean, and Marco around another one, mere feet away. Sasha and Krista were sitting on a grassy ledge about two metres away, bowls clutched in their hands. Jean looked up, scowling at Sasha over his shoulder. "I've heard enough about lizards."

"You and me both," Oluo muttered.

"But weren't you just hunting one earlier?" Hange asked.

"Weren't you hunting one just now?" Eren asked, not looking up from his bowl.

Hange blinked, looking pleasantly surprised, and a few soldier giggled. "Well, it's true," Ymir said.

Mina glanced over at the ash-haired boy as he paused, bringing the bar up to his mouth. He put it down with a sigh. "Well, we *are* supposed to hunt Titans, right?" Mina gasped quietly, eyes widening, as Eren stiffened.

"Are you just *trying* to pick a fight?" Petra sighed.

"It's his fault for getting riled up by the tiniest thing!" Jean threw his hands into the air.

"*Excuse* me?!" Eren leapt to his feet. "What the hell is that supposed to mean? I have every right to get upset—!"

"I was just making a joke—!"

"There are some things that you just can't make a joke out of—!"

"Shut *up*." Both boys' jaws clamped shut at Levi's snarl. "I couldn't care less how offended you two are," the dark-haired man snapped. "But we've got breaks for you to settle your differences—for now, let's just finish watching this horseshit, so we can get to the actually *important* stuff."

"And what do you mean by that?" the brunet snarled. Marco watched the exchange, eyes wide, horrified. "Why did you even join the Training Corps?" He stood up, fists clenched.

"Mother of Titans," Sasha groaned.

I understand why he's upset, Mike thought, memories of battles long fought—and lost—outside the Walls flashing through his mind. *But his temper and sensitivity is. . . it's just off the*

charts. He shook his head. *Even if his frustration's justified, he can't just walk around blowing up at the littlest thing*.

The other cadets gasped in unison as Jean threw down his ration bar, standing up. "To live something better than a humble life, at the very least," he snapped, glaring down at the shorter boy.

"Honesty is the best policy," Gunther muttered.

"What did you say?!" Armin turned, fumbling with his clipboard. "Some things can be tolerated, and others can't!"

"Eren," Petra said, bracing herself as she prepared to enter the conversation (she felt) they'd had a few dozen times already. "You *do* understand that, out of all the cadets that joined training in your year, only a few of them were actually *from* Wall Maria, right?"

Eld nodded. "She's right," he told them. "That's the case with most soldiers, really—there's a surprisingly low amount of people in the military who joined up with the intention to fight back. Even me, initially," he added.

"U—" Armin's pencil hovered over the paper as he watched nervously. "Umm. . ."

"It's fine, Armin!" Marco threw his hand out, waving it frantically. "It's just a chat during mealtime."

A few people laughed at the unexpected comedy. "Bet you anything the supervisor'd see through that immediately," Gunther chuckled.

"Heh!" Jean turned back to look at Eren, smirking. "You think that when a real Titan show up, the results of training hard will pay off?" he asked. "Good jo—"

"That's enough from you!" Jean was cut off as Eren lunged forwards, grabbing the lapels of his jacket.

"Please," Gunther said, turning to some of the closer recruits. "Please, please, *please* tell me it gets better."

Ymir shook her head regretfully. "Better get used to it," she told him. "It only gets worse from here."

"Stop it!" Krista cried, standing up.

"How about we actually hunt lizards?" Sasha suggested, smiling nervously, holding her hands up placatingly. "You'll feel better after that!"

"One-track mind, huh?" Moblit shook his head, amused.

"That's my line, you bastard!" Jean shouted over Sasha as the camera focused on the trees, the glow from the fire illuminating their lower trunks before they descended above into darkness. "Shut up!"

A few chuckles emerged at the comical framing.

"You know," Moblit commented, "every time the argument starts, it's always because of something really small, but then evolves into something really serious. Eventually, it's just them shouting the same things at each other over and over again."

Petra nodded. “That’s true.”

“You should really just stop worrying about it,” Sasha said. “I mean, yeah, it always seems like a really big issue, but, ninety-nine percent of the time, it’s barely anything, and fizzles out within minutes.”

“We are *right here*, you know,” Eren interjected, annoyed.

“Act like a child, get treated like one.”

Krista’s eyes widened suddenly as the boys continued arguing, looking to the side.

“What is it?” Gunther asked. “Oh!” He remembered what they’d seen earlier in the episode. “Thieves, right?”

“Didn’t know you had super-sense, too, Krista,” Sasha joked.

“No.” Krista shook her head. “I just thought I heard some leaves rustling.”

“Let go!” There was a thump of a fist making impact with something else as Krista looked back at the scuffle, brows furrowed. “You won’t be able to do anything, anyways!”

Sasha had her hands held up in front of her, grimacing nervously, while Connie stood to the side, hands planted on his hips, scowling. “Hey, guys. . .” Krista began, raising a hand.

Eren grimaced. “Sorry, Krista,” he said.

She smiled. “It’s no problem,” she said.

“Then what are you able to do?!” The camera moved away from Krista as the fighting cadets stumbled back and forth, hands clenched on each other’s shoulders, glaring at each other.

“I’m so much better than you!”

“Shut up! I’ll beat the crap out of you!” Eren aimed a kick at Jean’s leg and Jean snarled as they stumbled to the left.

“See what I mean?” Sasha turned to the veterans. “Best to just wait until they burn themselves out.”

“Hey, you two!” Marco cried, holding his hands up. Krista watched, eyes wide with concern, a nervous bead of sweat on her cheek. “Enough, already!”

Krista looked to the side again, brows drawn together. “We probably should hunt for lizards, after all!” Sasha suggested loudly.

A few people laughed. “You and your lizards!” Jean rolled his eyes, throwing his arms out exaggeratedly.

Krista glanced back at the other cadets, still looking unsure.

Krista grimaced at the screen—it bothered her to have so much attention on her. She’d preferred it when she was just another face in the background.

Erwin watched as she looked away from the screen, taking a cracker from a bowl on the coffee table, marking down her reaction for later.

The full moon bathed the rocky, barren mountains and the tops of the trees in a silvery-blue glow, and the camera panned down, showing the horses sleeping quietly, still tethered to their trees. The cadets were all bundled in their sleeping bags around the remains of one of the fires, dying flames flickering quietly. Connie let out a loud, rumbling snore as he rolled over, bag half unzipped, half his body hanging out, a leg thrown over the side.

Roars of laughter filled the room. "Seriously?" Connie demanded. "I get laughed at, even when I'm asleep?"

"Connie," Sasha laughed, "I know that the sleeping bags aren't the most comfortable thing in the world, but *seriously?*"

"There were snakes out there!" Eren was nearly bent double, snorting.

"Yeah, like a sleeping bag could've protected you from a snake!"

Sasha was curled up in a small ball next to him, Eren and Jean a few feet next to her, scowling and grumbling in their sleep.

"Don't tell me you guys were trying to pick a fight in your *sleep*," Eld groaned.

"You know what?" Gunther said. "I wouldn't be surprised, at this point."

Armin and Marco were stretched out peacefully, eyes closed, looking serene and quiet in their sleep, Marco's head by Armin's feet. Mina was curled up on her side, the head of an empty sleeping bag by the small of her back.

Ymir frowned, picking out the missing member almost immediately. "Why aren't you with the others?" she asked Krista.

Krista sat on the bank of a small lake, next to the thieves' abandoned firepit, the surface shimmering in the moonlight, sparkling, as if it were made of millions of melted diamonds. Her horse stood by her side, looking over the surface of the lake with its master.

It's lovely, Hange thought. *Idyllic. You'd never think there was a crime going on there. But. . .*

Krista watched the lake, not seeming to really see it, brows furrowed, lips pursed. She sighed, rubbing at her eye, and her horse lowered its head, snuffling quietly and nudging her shoulder. She smiled, rubbing its face and pressing her own to its nose.

'Aw's filled the room, and more than a few people smiled at the screen. Embarrassment peeked through Krista's discomfort, and she blushed.

"You're just like a storybook princess!" Sasha gushed.

A branch suddenly snapped, and she gasped, eyes widening. Both horse and soldier looked over, muscles tensed, as ominous, electronica music began playing.

"And, of course, the moment we think thing's are going okay, shit has to happen," Eren muttered.

A flock of birds twittered frantically as they took flight. Krista tensed, clenching a fist as she stared into the darkness of the forest. A masked man appeared behind her, and her eyes widened.

"Oh, *shit*," Eld hissed.

"Fuck!" Mike gasped. "It's one of those guys from the beginning, isn't it?"

Eren's eyes flew open as a scream rang through the forest. Horses whinnied as they galloped through the forest, dust billowing up behind them, more masked men riding them. Eren looked up to find himself face-to-face with the business end of a loaded rifle, a masked man in a red-and-gold vest holding it inches from his head. "Don't move," the man said, voice muffled by the bag pulled over his head, cutout eyeholes dark.

Eren winced, remembering what had happened that night. Thinking back on it now, he was starting to realize that he may have been a *bit* overzealous—though he still firmly believed he'd been justified in his actions. Maybe, he considered, next time, he'd think for a bit longer before going ahead. But he *would* still go ahead—and would do it again in a heartbeat.

More masked men made their way out of the forest, surrounding the rousing cadets, safety switches clicking as they aimed their rifles at the teenagers. "Gather their ODM," the man in the vest ordered. "Hurry."

A thought suddenly hit Erwin. *How did they know where to find the cadets?* he wondered. *A mole* is *a possibility*, *but, even then, I doubt they'd have been so precise as to be able to tell the thieves where the cadets were camping—and the maps didn't have the routes on them, either.* He frowned. *Everything just seems to perfect, what with the thieves somehow being able to find them and steal their things, all while never being seen once. There is another possibility. . . but even Keith wouldn't be so invested in the training as to. . . would he?*

The cadets stared up at their captors in shock. Eren's eyes darkened as he glared up at the man, the moonlight casting the rifle's shadow onto his face. "What will you do with them?" he asked.

"He has a *gun*—" Connie threw his arms forwards, pointing at the TV, "—to your *face*. That's the *last* question you should be asking right now."

"Well, the rest of you weren't much help," Eren huffed.

"Yes," Sasha said. "Because we wanted to *stay alive*." Next to her, Marco winced.

"Suicidal Bastard," Ymir muttered, though she was watching the TV anxiously. *Where is she? Where did they take her?* Logically, she knew Krista was fine—she *was* practically sitting in her lap, after all. Still, she couldn't help but worry.

"There are certain people that will pay handsomely for these," the man in the vest responded.

"Seriously?" Reiner stared. "What would the point of that be? I mean, you can't even use the gear outside the military—even learning it *in* cadets is next to impossible!" Bertolt nodded in quiet agreement.

"'Sides," Sasha added. "What would you even use it for?"

"I think that's enough of this conversation," Erwin said, noticing the growing coldness on Levi's face. "Let's just keep watching."

Connie's eyes flitted around, and Jean clenched his jaw as Eren turned to stare at the men surrounding them. "You can't beat the Titans, anyway," he said, "so what's wrong with taking useless equipment?"

Eren made an irritated noise of fury, clenching his teeth as he glared at the man.

"For once, I agree," Gunther said.

"Fuck them," Eren snarled. "*Fuck them*. First, they take Krista, then they take our gear, and disrespect the Scouts! We're putting our lives on the line for them, and they're just gonna walk away and sell the gear in the black market! To a bunch of low-lives! If they weren't in prison, I'd—"

"Do nothing," Levi spat, voice dripping with venom. "Because you're in the fucking custody of the Survey Corps, and if you do *anything* to risk being arrested, I'll rip your fucking spine out myself and hand it to the MPs."

"You—!" Mikasa jumped to her feet, eyes wide with fury.

"Mikasa!" Armin grabbed her arm. "He's got a point, you know."

"A point?" She turned her glare to him. "Eren was just making a joke! And—!"

"Mikasa, it's fine!" Eren said. "Sorry, Captain," he added.

Levi glared at him. "You better not do stupid shit like that in real life—we can't bullshit you out of the MPs' custody a second time."

"Yes, sir," Eren muttered.

Suddenly, his hand shot out and he grabbed the barrel of the gun, rocketing to his feet. Jean's eyes widened with a gasp as the other men turned their rifles to the brunet.

Mikasa stiffened, eyes widening. "You dumbass!" Oluo yelled.

"You're not bulletproof!" Gunther shouted. Annie wrinkled her nose.

"You could have died," Mikasa said quietly.

"Everyone, now!" Eren yelled as he grappled with the man in the vest, the rifle shaking, pointed at the sky.

"What the *hell*, Eren?!" Petra demanded.

"Eren!" Armin cried, jumping to his feet, gasping and throwing his hands over his head as the man behind him aimed his rifle at the back of his skull.

Connie and Sasha leapt to their feet, muscles tense as they whipped their heads around, looking at the armed men around them.

"How stupid are you?" Levi hissed.

"You could have gotten everyone there killed!" Petra stared at him. "What is *wrong*—"

"He just wanted to help!" Mikasa defended him, glaring at the veterans. "And he was the only one—!"

"They all had loaded guns aimed at their faces," Mike said. "What he did was rash, thoughtless, and, all in all, the act of a madman—"

"Eren's not insane!" Mikasa nearly yelled.

"Sit *down!*" Levi shouted.

"And *you*—!" Mikasa balled her fists.

"*Enough*, already!" Eren grabbed her arm, tugging her down. "Just quit it, okay? Just *drop it*."

Mikasa's jaws clamped shut and she sat down stiffly. Erwin regarded her coldly. "I," he said, "don't ever want to hear you—or *anybody*—shout at a superior officer again. No matter your feelings towards them, or your personal views," he added as Mikasa stiffened. "What Eren did was rash, even you would have to agree," he finished.

"Sir," Eren said. "With all due respect, the gear—"

"Is just boxes of metal," Moblit said. "Replaceable—and it frequently is. Human lives aren't." Eren pursed his lips, and Mikasa's fists shook, knuckles white, on the couch beside her.

"Do you understand?" Erwin asked.

Eren nodded. "Yes, sir."

"Ackerman?"

Mikasa's eye twitched, but she didn't look up. "Sir," she forced out through gritted teeth.

Levi narrowed his eyes as he regarded her, reprimand ready in his mouth, but turned away, following Erwin's lead and looking back at the TV.

Jean clenched his teeth, leaping to his feet and charging.

"I can't believe you actually did that," Ymir muttered, knowing better than to call attention to herself, the tension from the spat still hanging in the air.

There was a loud *bang*, followed by a flash of light and Jean made a noise of shock, stumbling to a stop at the burst of blood on his face.

Shout filled the room, with a few people's hands flying to their mouths, and almost everybody turning to stare at Jean, even though they knew he was perfectly fine.

"I'm fine," Jean said, as if in response to their thoughts, raising his hands and pushing himself further back in his seat as they all leaned closer to him, as if searching for a visible bullet wound.

"You could have died," Petra groaned, rubbing her nose. "You all could have died. Why are you all so. . . so. . ."

"Dumb," Eld supplied.

"We are not!" Eren protested.

"You ran face-first into a rifle," Gunther monotoned.

"This is all in the past," Erwin said, ignoring the pounding headache in the side of his head. "There's nothing we can do to change it. All we can do now is make sure that this doesn't happen in the future."

"Yes, sir," Jean muttered.

The man in the red vest grunted, drawing his rifle back and slamming Eren hard in the cheek. The brunet shouted, crashing to the ground, right cheek red and swollen. A man in a pair of dark overalls snapped his gun towards Armin as he made to help him, and the blond froze, shaking.

Mikasa's fists clenched. *I should have been there*. Her nails dug into her palms. *I should've* been there.

"You better think twice before you move," the man in the vest warned, voice low and furious. "Don't make a sound."

The cadets watched, eyes wide, faces damp with sweat, as a chorus of string quartets began playing a tense tune. Jean looked over his shoulder, eyes wide, blood running down his face from the cut over his cheekbone, and Eren lay on the ground, fist and teeth clenched, eyes wild with fury.

"Don't do anything stupid," Eld pleaded under his breath. "Don't do anything stupid. Not again. We're almost done the episode."

Currently Available Information

Wilderness March Exercise:

A map lay of the training exercise lay on the ground, English letters laid overtop, translated into the Common Tongue on the subtitles at the bottom of the screen: *Two teams from the Training Corps will make a round trip around the wilderness. the two teams will meet precisely at the designated location before moving on to the other route. The cadets will return to the training grounds once they've reached their target location. The objective of this exercise is to estimate their ability to sense danger and continue on under supervised conditions*.

"So, that's basically just reviewing what we already knew," Moblit said.

Hange frowned as they read the text. *Sensing danger and continuing on*. . . They tapped their chin as they considered the possibilities and implications of the phrase. *Does that mean what I think it means?* they wondered. *No. . . it couldn't. . . could it?* They shook their head. *Don't be ridiculous. They wouldn't*. . . They frowned. *Unless. . ?*

Owls hooted as a box of ODM gear was shown, the moonlight reflecting off of the neat rows of boxes, stocked full of blades, almost glowing in the silver light. "We won't take your lives," the masked man said as the thieves loaded two wagons full of the stolen gear. "We'll release you at some point."

A man walked into the back of the wagon, a hog-tied Krista slung over his shoulder.

"Bastard," Jean snarled. Reiner narrowed his eyes, glaring at the screen, and Ymir clenched her fists.

“But if you dare come after us, we’ll kill you.” The man in the red vest held a long, curved knife, running a hand over the blade, standing in front of the wagons. Two men flanked him, one on either side, aiming their guns at the cadets, who watched, helpless, as Krista was loaded into the wagon along with the gear. “Understand?”

“You went after them anyways, didn’t you?” Petra asked.

“Of course!” Connie looked affronted.

“We weren’t just going to leave Krista!” Eren exclaimed. “It’s not like we could just take their word that they’d tell the truth! And, besides—”

“I wasn’t implying that you were just going to leave her,” Petra said. “I’m just a bit surprised. Most people would’ve gone to the MPs, instead of risk her life, as well as their own, going after them themselves.”

The cargo doors slammed shut with a *bang* and the driver snapped their reins. The wagons took off, gear rattling as the shaky wheels bumped along the uneven terrain.

The cadets stood on the path, watching, powerless, as they vanished into the woods.

Trust me. Mike held back a grimace as he watched the screen. *I*—we—*know how that feels*.

“Everyone. . .” Armin, Mina, and Marco, who had been looking down, dejected, raised their heads as Eren began speaking. “If we attacked as a team, then we could do *something!*” His fists were clenched, shoulders shaking as he shouted, glaring at the ground.

“You could have,” Moblit agreed. “But what you did was risky.”

Eld nodded. “Besides,” he added, “in that situation, there was little you could have done. I’m no expert, but I’m assuming it’s hard to avoid a bullet when the rifle’s aimed right at your face.” Eren’s gnawed on his lips as he looked down, hands gripping each other.

Jean tilted his chin, knuckles white. “That’s your opinion.” The blood on his face had dried, the graze from the bullet already scabbed over.

Hange let out a breath they hadn’t realized they’d been holding in, relieved at the sight of the minor wound. Even though they were perfectly aware that Jean was sitting only a few feet from them, it was hard not to get sucked into what was happening on screen.

“I don’t agree. Actually,” Eren glared at the floor as Jean continued, “because of your crazy behaviour, everyone was in danger.”

“That is true,” Gunther told him.

Eren grimaced. “Yeah, I know,” he muttered.

“I’m sorry, what?” Jean leaned forwards, holding a hand up to his ear. “Did I just hear you *agree* with me?”

Erren shot him a withering look. “Just ‘cause I don’t like you, doesn’t mean I want you dead, Horseface,” he snapped. “‘Specially if it’s my fault.” *I’ve had enough of that for a lifetime*.

Jean raised his eyebrows, but leaned back, shrugging

Marco bit his lips, looking down. “This exercise is over,” he said quietly.

“It is,” Armin agreed, just as quiet.

“Are we abandoning Krista?” Eren demanded. Marco looked up in surprise, eyes widening, as slow piano music began playing.

“It would probably be better to go to the Police then try and save her yourselves,” Eld reasoned. “After all, they have all your gear, plus rifles.”

“They could kill her anytime they wanted,” Gunther agreed, nodding.

“Well, they didn’t,” Ymir said, scowling.

“What did you end up doing?” Petra asked.

“You’ll see,” Jean replied—though, judging by his wrinkled nose, it hadn’t been his favourite option.

“That’s not it,” Marco said. “But with just us, we can’t do anything. That’s why,” he lowered his hand, expression dejected, but voice still calm, reasonable, “we should ask the Instructor. . .”

“That’s reasonable,” Mike said.

Eren’s shoulders tensed, shaking as he balled his fists. “What if we don’t make it?” Marco started, blinking.

“And so is that,” Mike added.

Petra nodded. *Here’s the real decision*, she thought. *They risk her life both ways, and they’re equally risky. The difference is, one option only risks one life, and the other risks seven*.

Eren turned, eyes bright with unchecked fury. “I won’t accept this as it is!” he snarled. “I’m gonna save Krista for sure!” A furious tear formed in the corner of his eye, glinting with an insane, dangerous light, pupil contracted with rage. “I’ll go alone!”

You can’t save everyone, brat, Levi thought. *Trust me, I know. Better to learn when to give up now, than have to pay for it further down the line*.

Eren’s rage both worried Erwin and peaked his curiousity. *I’ve read reports about his behaviour both during training and the Battle*, he thought. *And what we’ve seen so far only solidifies what we already know. I wonder. . . why would a child like him, from a good, well-off family, have such* anger *in him? And why the desperation? Surely, his mother’s death couldn’t be the* only *factor impacting his behaviour, right?* Another thought hit him: a memory of something Nile had said during the trial. *Or is there something else?*

“Eren. . .” Armin spoke helplessly as a man’s voice began singing.

“*She said she gave all her love to me*. . .”

Eren made an annoyed voice, turning and storming into the woods.

“Th. . . that’s the wrong way,” Petra said.

“Eren!” Armin shouted, reaching out helplessly after him.

“Tch!” Jean flicked his hair irritably out of his face, gritting his teeth and clenching his fists as he stomped after Eren. “Wait!”

“Are you going to stop him?” Moblit asked.

"I wish," Jean snorted. "Not even a Titan could stop the dipshit when he's got his mind set on something."

"Saw Titan," Armin said, "can confirm." A shudder ran up his back at the memory.

The taller boy followed Eren as he reached the bank of the lake Krista had been sitting at barely an hour before. "All our horses were released!" Jean grabbed Eren's shoulder, forcing him to stop. "How are you going to find her?"

"They took your horses, too?" Petra gasped.

"No." Marco shook his head. "But they untethered them, and they ran away."

Mike frowned. "Military horses shouldn't do that," he said.

"They were new," Eren explained. "They'd only been *in* the military for about a year, or so."

"Like us," Sasha added.

"*We dreamt a new life, some place to be at peace*. . ."

"It's none of your business!" Eren grabbed Jean's arm, ripping it away from him and shoving the ash-haired boy away.

"He's talking sense, you dumb brat," Oluo snipped.

"It is!" Eren glared at Jean as he shouted. "I'm going with you!"

More than a few jaws dropped. "Seriously?" Eld asked.

"I mean," Gunther said. "I've only known you guys for, what, two hours? And I'm shocked."

"I wasn't just going to let him march off alone," Jean said. "Especially since that would have risked Krista, too."

The blonde girl flushed. "You really didn't have to do that," she said. "I—"

"Don't be ridiculous!" Sasha said. "We'd never leave you—or anyone else—behind!"

"Except maybe Eren and Jean," Connie quipped. "Ya know, when they're being annoying."

"Hey!" The others laughed at Eren's indignance, while Jean just snorted.

"*But things changed, suddenly*. . ."

Eren's eyes widened, and he stared at Jean, for once, speechless. Jean looked down, furious expression melting from his face. "I'm not going down in this undignified manner," he said quietly.

"Aw," Hange chuckled. "Still trying to cover it up?"

"You really do care, don't you?" Sasha grinned cheekily at Jean. He swatted her ponytail into her face in response, earning him a clear view of her middle finger.

"*I lost my dreams in this disaster*."

Marco walked up behind him, the others following. Eren looked up, no longer angry, but, rather, surprised and touched. "You guys. . ."

What a mood swing, Hange thought.

Erwin watched the screen analytically. *They've been through a lot*, he thought. *But the struggles they've survived together just strengthens their bonds. I doubt anything short of an all-out war could tear them apart, now*.

"*I'm crying, missing my lover*. . ."

The others stared back at him, expressions determined. Mina tilted her chin up slightly, despite the bean of nervous sweat on her cheek, and Sasha nodded, placing a hand over her heart. Jean and Eren locked eyes, resolution etched in their faces.

"You're going to save her now, right?" Eld asked. Eren nodded. The blond man sighed. "*Aaand* I'm getting nervous again."

The music carried into the next scene, playing over the rattling of the wagon's wheels on the uneven forest roads.

"*I don't have the power on my side forever*. . ."

Jean and Eren were crouched in a tree, hidden in the branches, watching as the horses passed by beneath.

"Clever," Erwin commented. "Attacking from above. Especially since they wouldn't have expected it, having taken your gear." Both boys straightened at the Commander's praise.

"*Oh, where is my lover?*"

"*In any case*. . ." a flashback of the cadets planning the rescue mission appeared, Connie frowning as he looked between the others. "How are we gonna find those guys?"

"*And I got no power*. . ."

"We might not make it, even if we split up," Mina said.

"Both valid points," Mike nodded.

"But Eren and Jean were in the tree earlier," Moblit said. "Meaning you did come up with a plan, right?"

"You'll see!" Connie crowed.

"I'm really starting to hate that phrase," Oluo growled.

Sasha gasped, a sudden stroke of inspiration hitting her. "In that case," she said, raising a finger, grinning with excitement as the others turned to look at her. "We'll just climb to a higher place!"

Erwin raised an eyebrow. *That's. . . surprisingly ingenious*.

"*I'm standing alone, no way*. . ."

"*When you get lost in the mountains, climb upwards!*" The cadets climbed up a rocky slope, Sasha in the lead, Connie and Jean close behind her, Marco only a few steps behind. Mina was a little bit further back, turning to look at Eren as a struggling Armin clung to his arm, bent over and panting for breath.

Armin flushed with shame and embarrassment. Connie held back a snicker, and Jean glared at him.

"Hey, don't worry about it," Hange told him, seeing his bright red face. "From what I've heard, it was your strategy that sealed the Wall, right?"

"They're right," Moblit said. "You can have strengths other than physical."

"Of course," Oluo added pompously. "It never hurts to have *physical* stren—"

Eld slapped his hand over Oluo's mouth. "You're great, kid," he reassured him.

"*Calling out your name*. . ."

"If you get lost in the forest, climb a high tree." They stood on a ledge, well above the treetops, faces illuminated by the moonlight, their sleeping bags in a pile behind them. Sasha's hands were on her hips as she looked over the forest, triumphant, Connie squinting comically and shielding his eyes with his hand. Armin was bent over, Eren, crouching, and Mina, holding a waterskin, by him, hands on his back. "That's what my father told me," Sasha explained.

"Well, your father's a very wise man," Mike said.

"Thank you, sir!" Sasha beamed.

Jean frowned, looking around. "Hey!" His eyes widened and he pointed, drawing their attention to a thin line of smoke rising from another section of the forest.

Hange straightened as the music cut off suddenly. "It's happening, isn't it?"

"Oh, yeah," Jean nodded. "It sure is."

There was a click as a spyglass was extended, and the image wavered, unfocused and shown through the perspective of the telescope. Thieves were walking around a small fire, carrying crates of gear, one herding Krista forwards, a rifle pressed to the back of her head.

Ymir snarled, nails digging into the palms of her hands, and Eren's eye twitched.

"It's fine," Krista said quietly. "I was fine—"

"That's a rifle aimed at the back of your head," Ymir hissed. "If there's one thing I know, it's that you're *not* fine."

"They didn't hurt me, Ymir," Krista said. "I was *fine*."

"We're heading out as soon as we've loaded everything," the man in the vest told the others. The spyglass swung towards him, and the perspective changed, revealing the man to be an older fellow, face lined with wrinkles, head bald stubbly beard and mustache unshaven. "Hurry!" A cross dangled from a thin cord around his neck, tucked into his shirt, and he held a gun over his shoulder.

"What a weird outfit," Moblit muttered.

Eren lowered the spyglass, passing it over to Jean. "What do we do?" Marco asked as the light-haired boy took a look at the site. "We'll be too late at this rate. They have rifles on them. We're gonna get shot."

Hange tilted their head, curious at the sight of Eren's face, still marked up. *Why hasn't he healed yet?* they wondered. *Is it because he's focused so much on the mission? No*—they shook their head. *There were plenty of times in the past where he was completely focused on something else, and still healed anyways*. They frowned. *Could it be because he's exerting himself physically?*

"I have an idea." They turned at Armin's voice, looking at the blond, who was crouched on the rocks next to them.

"See?" Moblit looked at Armin. "You make your own contributions to the group."

Mike nodded. "You don't have to be the best warrior in order to be important," he said. Reiner moistened his lips, and Bertolt gulped.

A chorus of drums began beating as Eren slid down the steep slope of the hill, dust billowing around his boots, joining the others, gathered on the other side of the rocks.

"There's the music, again!" Hange said.

"So we're going to see it happen, soon," Petra nodded, grinning.

"They're probably going to sell the stolen goods," Armin said, holding out a map as the others crowded around him. "If that's the case, they'll probably find a wide exit around this area." Connie reached for the map, holding it out so he and Marco could get a better look. "We'll ambush them before they get there."

"This song, whatever it's called," Connie said, bouncing up and down in his seat, "is motivational as hell."

Erwin nodded. "This show does have an impressive soundtrack," he agreed.

"Do you think that this is the same song they're going to use for all the exciting bits?" Eld asked. "I mean, we sure have heard it an awful lot."

"Maybe," Mike said. "But I'm willing to bet that there're other songs, too."

Connie glanced up from the paper, looking at Armin. "It'll be hard since we have no horses," he said.

"It's possible, if there's a wide exit." The two boys glanced up at Sasha, who was perched a bit above them. "If we leave the forest."

She sure does know her way in the woods, Gunther noted. *That'd be a good skill to hav when going outside the Walls*.

Bootheels scraped along steep stone, dust and dirt flying into the air. "Yahoo!" Sasha cried out in delight as she skidded down the rocky slope, a bag thrown over her shoulder. The other cadets followed after her, some of them carrying their own bags, leaping and sliding down the rocks.

"That looks fun!" Petra said.

"Well, I guess that is a faster way of moving," Erwin said, amused.

At the thieves' campsite, the first wagon took off, the horse trotting slowly away from the clearing. A blonde, mustachioed man sat in the cargo hold, a rifle propped over his shoulder, next to Krista, who stood, hands tied to a beam.

"They wouldn't even let you sit?" Mike asked, affronted on her behalf. "That's dangerous!" Krista bit her lips, rubbing at her wrists, as if she could still feel the rope biting into her.

The camera followed the movements of the two vehicles, rolling slowly down a thin, mountainside road. "*After clearing the forest*," Armin's voice explained, "*the road divides into two routes*." The camera whipped up, showing the two paths: one, diverging deeper into the woods; the other, twisting away from the trees, towards the cities. "*One of the roads goes to a wider exit, and once they enter there, we don't stand a chance*."

"*So*. . ." Mina, hiding in a bush, gasped, eyes widening as she saw the wagons rumbling down the road. She turned, hissing at Connie, hidden in the branches of the tree. "They're here!"

"You guys've got a good system set up," Mike commented.

Most cadets of their age and experience wouldn't even be able to think up half of what they've put together, Erwin thought. *I guess there's a reason they're called the most gifted class in the past century*.

The bald boy pulled back, hard, on a rope. "Here goes!" he called. He shouted as he took a running leap, swinging through the air over the road. Sasha, holding onto a rope tied to the tree across from them, reached forwards and grabbed his hand, shoving him behind her, where he landed in the grass.

"That was fun!" Sasha told Connie. He nodded, grinning, and they high-fived.

"Dangerous, though," Mike commented.

"Still fun!" Connie said.

The leaves of the other tree rustled as it was pulled forwards, the rope, tied to every major branch, made it bend, blocking off the path.

The plan's actually very original, Hange thought. *I can't see any way it could go wrong from here, except*— "How do you know which carriage Krista and the gear are going to be in?" they asked.

"You'll see," Marco promised.

"*And if it goes well?*" Jean asked.

The way the entire scene is being shown is pretty interesting, Petra thought. *What with it being a mix of the actual action and them planning the operation. It makes it engaging—like I'm actually there, but, at the same time, just watching*.

"Which carriage are Krista and the ODM in?" Eren asked. "How can we tell?"

"If we hear a rattling sound," Marco said, "we'll be able to tell."

"*Oooh*," Hange said. "Got it."

"That's pretty smart, actually," Ymir said grudgingly.

Marco leaned against a rock outcrop, holding a rope, Armin crouched next to him. "*If the equipment is in the first carriage, I'll pull once*." The camera panned over the woods, showing the rope hanging over countless branches as it stretched between the boy and whatever was on the other end. "*If it's the rear one, then twice*." Eren crouched in his tree, eyes fixed on two hales of a tin can hanging from the end of the rope. "*If both, I'll pull thrice*."

"You've got a system covering the whole forest, haven't you?" Mike chuckled. "Gotta say, kids—I've done some crazy things in my years as a Scout, but I don't think I've ever turned a forest into my personal information system before."

Marco's eyes were squeezed tightly shut, brow furrowed in concentration as the first carriage came past, wheels bumping against a rock on the path.

The metal of the ODM boxes clanged against each other as the second wagon ran over the rock, metal ringing out against metal.

"Go!" Petra hissed, pumping her fist.

Marco's eyes widened, and he yanked on the rope. The ringing of the tin banging against itself echoed through the forest as the cans swung back and forth on the end of the line.

Eld inhaled as the music cut off, letting the clashing of the metal fill the room. *Perfect timing*.

"*And at that point*. . ." Jean and Eren watched as the wagons rolled past beneath them.

"You're late!" They leapt from the trees, arms flailing as they free-fell towards the second wagon. The fabric of the bonnet tore as they crashed through, landing in front of two dark-haired thieves.

Petra gasped, spotting the blonde-haired girl tied up in the background. "She's in the first wagon!"

Ymir sighed. "You bullshat your way out of that one, didn't you?"

"Uh. . ." Eren scratched the back of his head. "I don't know what you're talking about. . ?"

"We thought they'd be in the same wagon!" Jean defended their plan.

"Idiots," Levi grumbled. "Only an idiot would keep all their shit in one place." Armin furrowed his brow, confused, and opened his mouth, ready to ask a question, but was cut off as Eren shook his head, pointing back at the TV.

"Who the hell are you?!" a curly-haired man yelled.

The other man dove at Jean, but the ash-haired boy was faster, ducking and grabbing him around the waist. The thief screamed as he was thrown clean out of the back of the wagon, dust flying up around him as he tumbled away.

A few people clapped and Jean puffed his chest out, looking proud.

In the first wagon, Krista's guard stood up, with a sound of shock as the blonde-haired girl turned around, eyes widening with a small gasp at the sight of her friends. "What's going on?!" the blond man yelled.

"You—!" the other thief didn't get a chance to finish as Eren grabbed his arm, kicking him to the ground.

"Interesting," Erwin noted, frowning. "I've never seen that move before."

"Hey!" Jean said. "That's the move you used on me!" Eren stuck his tongue out at him, and Sasha had to wrestle an apple from the boy's hand before he hurled it at the Shifter.

"Isn't that—?" Reiner asked Annie. She cut him off with a cold glare, and he narrowed his eyes.

Jean, meanwhile, ran forwards, grabbing the driver—a bearded man in a pair of dark green overalls—around the neck. Sounds of fists against flesh sounded out from inside the wagon, and the thief Eren had defeated was sent flying out the back after his partner. "You do this every time you get defeated!" Jean shouted as the thief screamed, slamming into the ground.

Laughter erupted throughout the room at the unexpected comedy. "You're not seriously picking a fight during another fight, are you?" Sasha cried, exasperated.

"How are you still alive?" Eld asked.

"That brat!" Krista's guard pointed his rifle at the other wagon, aim swaying as the wagon bounced along the ground. The wheels of the wagon suddenly collided with a stone and both Krista and the guard fell, the guard's rifle misfiring, blowing the beam from the top of the wagon.

"Close call!" Hange gasped.

Krista gasped, landing on the ground, bound hands in front of her.

The other wagon skidded along the dirt, spark flying up from the wheels' scraping against rocks. The driver shouted as he was thrown from the front, rolling down the side of the path.

The man in the vest—who just happened to be driving the first wagon—turned, letting out a small 'tsk!' at the sight of his defeated goons.

"Damn. . ." Krista's guard reloaded the rifle, aiming at the boys again. "Next one won't miss!"

"Shit," Eld's knuckles turned white. Mikasa paled.

"Stop!" Krista ran at him, grabbing his rifle and yanking at it.

"Whoo!" Jean clapped. "

In the other wagon, the boys gasped. "Krista!" Eren shouted.

"You. . !" The blondes' struggling caused the weapon to misfire—again. This time, the bullet shattered the spokes of one of the rear wagon's front wheels. Wood sprayed through the air and both boys yelled as the carriage collapsed, skidding along the path and crashing into a tree.

Sasha, Marco, and Connie, who had been running after the vehicles, stopped, letting out almost simultaneous gasps at the sight, before charging forwards with renewed vigour.

Jean looked up, supporting himself against the back. "Are you okay?" he called.

Eren pushed himself up, grimacing. "Yeah, somehow. . ."

"Jean! Eren!" They turned as Marco called out their names, running towards them.

"We're alright!" Jean told him. "And so is the ODM." The crates had fallen over, scattering the boxes across the floor of the wagon, but the only damage, if any, they'd sustained were a few scratches.

"But Krista's still. . ." Eren began.

Marco stood up straight, face set. "After them!" he ordered.

Cables whirred as the cadets shot their anchors out, shooting off after the first wagon. "Sasha." The girl looked up as Armin walked towards her. "Do you have a signal flare?"

"Y—Yeah, I do. . ."

Armin looked up, expression stern and resolute. "Can I borrow it?"

A column of green smoke rocketed into the air, sparks sputtering out around it as the cannister vanished into the sky. "This bitch!" The man in the vest turned as the guard let out a snarl, shaking Krista, who clung to him like glue, about. "I said quit it!"

She let out a shout as she was thrown to the ground.

Her eyes widened as she looked up and the man aimed his rifle at her face.

She doesn't look scared, Hange thought, frowning. *In fact, she looks almost. . .* angry. They glanced at the blonde from the corner of their eye. *The way she's acting, you'd think she's stared death in the face before*.

"Don't kill her!" the man in the vest yelled. "She's our bounty!"

It was quiet enough to hear a pin drop in the thick, plush carpet, a thin mask of horror settling over the room.

"What the *fuck?*" Eld whispered.

"Please tell me that means what I think it does," Sasha squeaked.

Mikasa's face was pale with fury, skin of her palms an angry red where her nails bit into them. "Bastards," Eren snarled quietly.

The blond man glanced at him, confused, then grinned, chuckling as he lowered the gun. "So that's how it is." He aimed the rifle at her again, the barrel steady. "Thanks to your

friends, we've lost our score!" Krista pushed herself up, glaring at him. "You'll have to take responsibility!" She glowered at him, eyes dark with fury.

"He's sick," Connie said quietly.

Ymir glared at Krista. "You never told me."

"Nothing *happened*," she replied.

"Krista—"

"Ymir."

"You could have gotten hurt!" Ymir hissed. "You could've been—you could've—!"

"Ymir," Krista whispered. "Nothing would have happened. *Trust me*."

"What do you mean?"

"You'll see."

Suddenly, an anchor shot through the air, embedding in the man's arm. He let out a yell of pain as the music crescendoed, his rifle flying from his hands and clattering against the ground.

Whoops and sighs of relief filled the room.

"Oh, thank Rose!" Petra let out a breath she hadn't known she'd been holding.

"Serves him right," Eren sneered.

"What?!" The man in the vest turned, eyes widening in shock.

Eren and Jean swung towards the wagon, puffs of gas dissipating in the air behind them as they flew after them. The man in the vest let out a yell of fury, snapping the reins. The horses whinnied, galloping faster, as the blond guard whipped his rifle around to aim at the two cadets. "Damn!"

Jean propelled himself back, dodging a bullet and swinging around the wagon in a long arch. The guard snarled, tossing the rifle aside and grabbing another one.

"Damn!" Gunther clapped appreciatively. Jean grinned, shooting Eren a triumphant look.

The two cadets zipped past each other in the air, colliding and using each other as launchpads.

"They actually work pretty well together, don't they?" Hange commented.

Erwin nodded. "If it weren't for their attitudes toward each other, I'd say that they'd be perfect comrades on the battlefield."

"It looks like they don't mind partnering up in a life-or-death situation, though." Mike offered his own input.

That needs to change, Erwin thought.

Eren let out a battle cry, whipping out his blades, Jean barely a second behind him. The image slowed as they whipped around to the front of the cart, blades slicing through the reins and severing the horse from the wagon.

The soldiers cheered, leaping to their feet and pumping their fists in the air. Levi winced, slamming his hands over his ears.

The horse whinnied as it galloped away, vanishing into the woods. The man in the vest let out a shout of shock, grabbing the brake and pulling. Sparks flew as the wagon tumbled across the road, the wheels flying off from the force of the impact. A cloud of dust erupted into the air, rising leagues above the tree line, as it finally skidded to a stop.

"Woohoo!" Gunther cheered.

"That was awesome!" Marco told Jean.

Petra frowned, remembering what they'd seen in the beginning of the episode. "That's not the end, though, isn't it?" she asked.

Eren scowled, and Krista bit her lip. "No," Armin muttered.

A cloud of dust hovered in the air around the wagon, which had been pinned to the ground, almost completely crushed by a tree trunk, felled by the wagon's collision. Jean and Eren landed in front of the destruction, blades still out. Eren began walking forwards, Jean following, as Connie and Marco landed behind them.

"Nice of you to join us," Jean snorted.

Connie threw his hands into the air. "Hey, I was just following *your* plan!"

Connie gasped at the sight before them. Light flashed off a curved, dirty blade, held to Krista's neck by the man in the vest.

"Shit," Oluo muttered.

"This is where the episode started," Gunther said quietly.

Levi grimaced at the filthy blade. *They'd be in a pretty rough pickle if that broke skin*.

He glared at the cadets, eyes wide, wild with panic and fury, sweat rolling down his face. "Stay back!" The guard stood next to him, aiming a rifle at them. "Throw away your weapons!"

"Damn," Moblit muttered. *They're stuck*.

Eren and Jean glared at him, forms tensed, blades held at the ready. "Do as I say, and hand over the maneuver gear!" the guard roared. "Hurry up!"

Sasha, Connie, Armin, and Mina stared at the man, Connie's teeth gritted, sweat on his forehead, Mina's eyes wide with horror. Armin suddenly looked up, and his eyes widened, a small smile forming on his lips.

"Huh?" Hange blinked. "Why're you smiling?"

Does he have some other plan? Eld muttered. *No, we would've been shown that. Maybe he's bluffing? No—it's too small to be a provocation.* He frowned. *Please tell me he isn't insane.*

Eren and Jean exchanged a small look before growling and turning to their gear, dropping their blades and pulling at the boxes, eyes heavy with anger and resignation. Marco and Connie followed suit.

"How're you going to get out of this one?" Petra asked. She couldn't see any way that they could all get out of this alive, let alone unharmed. *But they're all here, aren't they?* She turned to glance at the recruits. *So what saved them?*

"Shit," the man in the vest muttered, voice low enough that only Krista could hear. "You've gotta be kidding me. . ." Krista's eyes were wide as she listened to his monologue. "How did this happen to me?" She turned slowly, looking up as he spoke.

Erwin leaned forwards, furrowing his brows. *What's your motivation?*

"Even if we run away from the Titans. . ." His teeth were gritted, sweat dripping from his cheekbones.

"Huh?" Eren blinked. "Titans?"

"One-track mind," Jean snorted.

"That's not what I meant!" Eren snapped. "I just mean—why would he be talking about Titans? Especially at a time like this?"

"Come to think of it," Marco said, frowning. "He *did* mention Titans, when he was taking the gear, didn't he?"

"Wait," Moblit turned to look at them, brow furrowed. "You didn't know about this?"

The recruits shook their head. Collectively, every eye turned to Krista.

She flushed. "I—I didn't think that. . . think it would be, well, important," she stuttered, the stares of the other soldiers burning into her. Ymir, noticing her nervousness, glared at those closest to them. Thankfully, they turned away, and Krista let out a small sigh of relief.

While she'd gotten, more or less, used to seeing herself on screen, it still bothered Krista how nothing on TV seemed private—even the deepest, most secret thoughts were laid out for everybody to see. She just hoped they wouldn't show how much the man's words had shaken her. *I'm unimportant. I'm no one*.

"What can you do out here where nothing can be risked?" He grimaced, pressing his lips tightly together. "Don't burden others." Krista gasped at his next words.

Krista clenched her jaw.

"I should have taught my daughter that much." She stared at him, eyes wide.

So that's why. Mikasa glanced at Krista.

"Wait. . ." Eld said, furrowing his brow. "His daughter. . ?"

Hange gasped. "His daughter must have been a Scout!" they realized. "Or, at least, someone who was killed by a Titan."

"During the fall of Wall Maria, maybe," Mike hummed, scratching his chin. "But he did talk about being a burden. . ." Krista flinched, a miniscule, almost imperceptible motion.

"That's possible," Petra said. "Petty crime did skyrocket after we were pushed back to Rose, after all."

"Maybe she was a fresh graduate who joined the Scouts before she was ready?" Moblit suggested.

"All possibilities," Erwin muttered. His face was a mask of calm, hiding the unease he felt at seeing the man—a grieving father—threaten the cadets. His discomfort only heightened at the thought that of the cause of his grief: a woman who could have, possibly, been under his command.

The guard moved forwards, rifle pointed at the cadets. "Hurry up—!"

Annie and Mikasa swooped in from above, blades flashing as they whirled through the air. Annie landed on the ground with a quiet grunt, slicing the man's rifle out of his hands.

"Whoa!" The soldiers were shaken out of their musings as the two girls attacked.

"So that's why you were smiling!" Sasha said to Armin.

"That was badass!" Eren declared. Mikasa tugged her scarf a bit higher.

"What?!" The man in the vest stumbled back as Mikasa's swords sent his blades flying. Krista stumbled out of his grasp, eyes widening at the sight of the dark-haired girl.

"Hell yeah!" Connie shouted, leaping to his feet and pumping his fists into the air.

"Go Mikasa!" Sasha cheered. "And Annie, too!"

"Mikasa!" Eren shouted.

Mikasa whirled around, sword landing against the man's throat.

A few people stiffened.

"Don't kill him!" Krista screamed.

Both Annie and Mikasa froze, swords held to their respective foes' Adam's apples.

Petra exhaled. "That was close," she breathed.

Oluo nodded. While he'd seen more than enough bloodshed on the battlefield, and stared Death itself in the face (he grimaced a bit at the embarrassing reminder of the last episode), he still wasn't sure how he felt about watching to teen girls—still kids—kill two men in. . . well, not cold blood, exactly, but still murder, technically.

Mikasa looked at Krista for a moment before slowly lowering her blade. "I see," she said. The man in the vest gulped, a line of blood running from the incision in his skin. He let out a choked sigh, landing on his rear.

She really was seconds from killing him, Jean thought, a chill washing over him as he glanced at the girl whom he'd pined after for so long. *Can she really be so cold?*

"Looks like you went through a lot of trouble." Annie lowered her own sword, and the guard collapsed to his knees.

The way they were both acting as if death were the simplest thing in the world, Mike thought. *It was as if they'd already killed enough for them to become numb*. He glanced at Mikasa. *I know her story, but. . .* He thought of the blonde girl, sitting in the back of the room with her equally mysterious companions. *What about her?*

Slow, gentle music began playing as the cadets, recovered from their shock, turned and began smiling, talking to each other.

"That's the same song as the one from Jean's episode, right?" Connie asked.

"Yeah." Sasha nodded.

Armin waved Sasha's hand away, sheepish, as she and Eren congratulated him. Connie turned, pointing something out, and the other cadets looked down the path, too. Joy and delight filled their faces as Reiner, Thomas, Bertolt, and Daz trotted down the dirt road, astride the recovered horses.

"Hey, you found them!" Hange grinned. "Where were they?"

"Not that far, honestly," Reiner said. "They were grazing in a grove of trees a bit away from the camp."

Thomas waved at them, beaming, before the image faded to black.

The thieves stood in a row, hands tied together, as they were led into a Military Police wagon. "*In the end*," the narrator told them, "*the gang of thieves were arrested by the Military Police*." Annie, Reiner, and Bertolt stood in a small cluster to the side, talking quietly, while Marco saluted a Military Policeman, giving him their report.

Oluo chortled. "Never too late to make a first impression, huh. . ?" He trailed off, realizing why the others were all staring at him. "Oh," he muttered. "Right. Uh, sorry."

"Mhm." Marco hummed, lips pursed. "Yeah, it's. . ." He cleared his throat. "Yeah. It's fine." He smiled weakly. "Fine," he added in a low mumble.

Petra glared at Oluo, smacking him on the back of the head—a little harder than usual, but even he had to agree that he deserved that.

The other cadets where gathered around a small fire, snacking at chatting. Krista stood with Armin and Jean, who was glaring at Eren as Mikasa wiped at his mouth with a handkerchief.

Connie desperately wanted to make a joke, but the mood in the room was still heavy, and even he had enough tact to realize this was Not the Time.

Krista herself, however, was staring at the man in the vest, a hand clutching her shirt over her heart.

Ymir frowned at the way she watched the man as he was led into the wagon with the other thieves. *The way she's holding her hand. . . it's almost like she's saluting him*.

Erwin glanced over at the other blonde, making a note to look deeper into her past. *There's something about her*, he thought. *She's got a story. I just need to find it*.

"*Without taking any casualties, the incident was over*."

The early morning sunlight didn't quite reach the Cadet Camp yet, surrounded by its high walls in the little valley as it was, but the golden rays shone brilliantly anyways. "*Although the exercise was suspended*," the narrator continued speaking as Shadis opened a folder that had been placed on his desk, looking over the neat lines of notes printed on the stack of paper within. "*We still had to submit our records of the incident, in all honesty and without*

***pretense*.” Armin stood in front of the desk, standing in a stiff salute as the Commandant read through the notes.**

“Hold on,” Moblit said, frowning. “So, Armin’s the narrator again?”

Jean shook his head. “It’s weird,” he said. “I mean, they definitely have the same voice, right?” The others nodded.

“There’s gotta be something more behind it,” Eren said.

Mikasa nodded quietly. *But what?*

Armin gulped before lowering his head slightly, looking at the man. “May I ask a question?” he asked.

“What is it?” Shadis asked, not looking up from the papers.

“Should we have turned back at the time when our ODM was stolen?” the blond asked. Shadis turned a page, still not looking up. “Or were we right pursuing those thieves?”

“Ah,” Hange said. “The question we’ve been asking all episode.”

Are we finally going to get an answer? Erwin wondered.

“There’s no need to answer that,” Shadis replied, gaze still fixed on the report. “But. . .” Armin blinked as the man continued. “Whether you’re a soldier or a regular civilian. . .” Shadis eyes were shadowed, a hint of what almost looked like regret as he read through Armin’s pages upon pages of notes.

Levi frowned, noticing the look in his eyes. *What’s he going on about now?* He knew more than most about Shadis’s self-confidence and inferiority issues (a waste of time, in his opinion, especially in this day and age), but what he was talking about right now seemed to be so much more. . . personal?

“We all decide how to respond in the face of distress. Go back, or go after the criminal. . .” He looked up, eyes steely and stern once more. “Which one is most important in your opinion, Arlert?”

Which is it, I wonder? Mike wondered. He found that he couldn’t decide.

“T—” Armin pursed his lips, stiffening in his salute. “That’s. . .” He lowered his head slightly, eyes bright with contemplation.

“*I couldn’t answer it*.” The sun had risen completely by now, rays of light glancing off the glass of the office’s windowpanes. “*Perhaps. . . meeting those thieves during the process. . . was imposed upon us as part of the exercise*.”

My thoughts exactly. Erwin glanced over at the blonde recruit. *He thinks like me*.

“I never actually considered that,” Jean frowned.

“Do you think that Armin’s right?” Sasha asked.

“You know, I never even considered that option,” Marco said. “But, looking back on it now, it’s actually not that hard to fathom.”

Eren nodded, brow furrowed. “There were a lot of things about the exercise that just didn’t add up,” he said. “Like, how did they find us so easily?”

Armin nodded slowly. “Do you think that they gave him some kind of incentive?” he asked. “The man in the vest, I mean.”

“I don’t think money would have cut it,” Jean said. “Especially since there was such a high chance of him being arrested.”

“Maybe the chance to ‘save’ a group of kids from the future of fighting Titans?” Sasha suggested.

“That’s actually not that far-fetched,” Moblit said.

Elsewhere in the camp, Marco walked up a set of stairs, holding two mugs, to where Eren leaned against edge of the tower.

The music’s so nostalgic. Eren smiled sadly as he watched the screen. *Even though we didn’t do much back then, sometimes, I really miss that time*.

“I shouldn’t have accepted the group leader position.” Eren looked up as Marco stopped by him, offering one of the mugs.

“Really?” Eren stood, taking the mug. “It seemed to me that it fit you.”

“Nah,” Marco smiled as Eren took a sip of the drink. “I’m not suited to be a leader.” Eren blinked as he glanced over at him. “Jean’s more suited for the job.”

I can’t help but agree with him, Erwin thought. *While Marco’s certainly a reassuring presence, Jean’s better at pointing things out—he’s not exactly a master of strategy, but, from what I’ve seen, he’s on a good road.* He chuckled slightly. *If you take away the argumentative attitude, that is*.

“Jean?!” Eren raised an eyebrow, wrinkling his nose. “Leave me out, then.”

Jean flipped Eren off, and Eren happily returned the favour.

Marco laughed as he took another sip. “You’ll understand, someday,” he said.

“I wonder about that,” Eren muttered, placing the mug on top of the guardrail and leaning down, propping his chin up in his hands.

It’s so peaceful. Sasha smiled sadly.

Marco smiled, looking up at the sky. “I wonder what kind of soldiers everyone will become,” he said. Eren smiled too, a gentle breeze ruffling their hair as it blew by, making their cloaks flutter, dry leaves drifting past them.

Mike’s lips twitched into a small smile as they watched the sun rise slowly over the camp. *I haven’t been back there in. . . Sina’s Tits, it’s been a while*. He leaned back a bit in his seat, crossing his arms. *Maybe I’ll go back to visit soon*.

“*That was in the year 848*,” the narrator said as the two cadets looked over the empty, sleepy campground. “*When we fought our first battle, two years ago*.”

Eren grimaced as he stood up, feeling his back pop as he stretched.

“We’ve got another break before the next set of episodes, right?” Armin asked.

Omni (who had drifted away about halfway through the second OVA) glanced up from her bowl of cereal in the kitchen. “Mhm.” She swallowed her mouthful of colourful rings (Eren was almost completely certain that that shouldn’t be edible) and waved her spoon at the stairs. “Keep looking around the apartment, spend some time chatting, or some shit. I don’t really care.” She shrugged, turning back to the colourful box on the counter and pouring more rainbow rings into her bowl.

The recruits leapt to their feet and began rushing away, Levi’s Squad following soon after. Erwin waited until the last of the soldiers had wandered up the stairs before standing up and turning to the rest of the veterans.

“We need to talk.”

“I don’t trust them.”

Hange raised their eyebrows at Levi’s blatant statement. “What, not even a bit?”

“Don’t tell me that you think there’s nothing shitty going on with them,” he countered.

“I agree,” Mike said, leaning against the wall. The five of them had gathered in Levi and Erwin’s room—a quick test of Hange screaming at the top of their lungs in their room next door had confirmed their suspicions of the soundproof walls, and they’d determined that it was the safest place to speak and not be heard. “They’ve been acting weird, ever since. . . well, since we got here, really.”

“That could be chalked down to nerves,” Moblit pointed out. “I mean, it *has* been a lot to take in for one day.”

“That’s true,” Erwin nodded. “But I have a feeling that that’s not it.”

Levi titled his head to the sight, propping his cheek up on the side of the armchair. “Elaborate?”

Erwin tapped his fingers on his knee. “You remember what Omni said, about us all being a part of a story, correct?” he asked. The others nodded (“Still creepy as fuck,” Levi huffed.). “Well, going off that, we can assume that all of us who’ve been brought here are the main characters.”

“Where’re you going with this, Erwin?” Hange asked.

“It’s just a thought,” Erwin said. “But, even though the story’s been focusing on Eren, Armin, and Mikasa so far, I’m guessing, by the way it’s been progressing, that the rest of our storylines will be tying in, too.”

“You think that their storylines are involved in this?” Mike asked.

“I think all of our storylines are involved, somehow,” Erwin said. “But the show seems to have been showing them a lot more than the other cadets.”

Moblit nodded. “Not in scenes, either,” he added. “More like. . . I don’t know. Showing them watching the proceedings?”

“Observing,” Levi muttered.

“Oh!” Hange held up their notebook. “Speaking of observing. . .” They began flipping through the pages. “I’ve been writing some things down—” they began.

“*Some?*” Mike interrupted. “The library in Mitras’s got less words than that!”

Hange stuck their tongue at him. “As I was saying. . .” They made a small, triumphant noise as they found the page they’d been looking for. “Okay, so there’s a few main points I gathered from the OVAs.”

“Seriously?” Levi wrinkled his nose. “They seemed like bullshit to me.”

“Well, yes,” Hange said. “A lot of it as. But there were some points that I felt stood out.” Levi nodded. “First:” they cleared their throat, “Mikasa is weird—” Mike shot them a confused glance. “Okay, that was weird phrasing. But you did notice things, right?”

“I noticed a lot of things,” Mike said. “You’ll have to narrow it down.”

“The first thing that stood out to me,” Hange said, “was her strength. We all know that size can be deceiving—I mean, just look at Tiny over there.” They waved a hand at Levi.

“You’re one more short joke away from getting decapitated,” Levi snarled.

“Let them finish, Levi,” Erwin said.

“Yeah, Levi, let me finish.”

“I swear to the Walls, Shitty Glasses—”

“Children,” Mike sighed. “We’ve only got ten minutes, so let’s get this over with, okay?”

Levi flipped Hange off, and they grinned cheekily. “*So*,” they said. “She’s strong. But, like, *inhumanly* strong. Basic knowledge of human biology says that, based on her age, size, and sex, that shouldn’t be possible. There’s only one other person I know who defies nature like that, and he’s sitting in front of me.”

Levi furrowed his brows as they pointed at him. “Yeah,” he said. “Well, it’s weird, sure, but I really don’t get how it relates to the. . . ‘*story*.’” He made air quotes next to his head and a pinched expression as he forced the word out, disgruntled at the idea of being used as entertainment for people in another world—people, who, apparently, were sick fucks who liked watching people suffer.

Hange shrugged, a hint of defeat shadowing their cheerful expression. “Neither do I,” they admitted. “But, okay, here’s the thing—and it has to do with Reiner, Annie, and Bertolt, too, so you’re probably going to be interested, Erwin.”

Erwin raised an eyebrow. “Go on.”

“In that last episode,” Hange said. “When Mikasa noticed that bird, do you remember what happened next?” Moblit nodded, while the other three shook their head. “The image moved,” they said. “Ya know? That weird panning thing the perspective does? Anyways, it moved over to Reiner, Annie, and Bertolt. They were watching her. Like they knew something we didn’t.”

“That’s true,” Mike said, frowning slightly. “Maybe they were just curious?”

“But then why would the episode draw attention to them?” Moblit asked. Mike hummed thoughtfully.

“Do you think they know something about her skillset?” Erwin asked.

“I think,” Levi said, “that they know a lot of things.”

“Well, that goes without saying,” Hange said. “I don’t know what, but they’re definitely hiding something. Nobody stays that quiet for that long for no reason.”

Mike frowned. “You don’t think. . .” he began.

“The spy?” Moblit asked, picking up on his train of thought.

“It’s a strong possibility,” Erwin said. “Even stronger, now that they’re here. We *did* suspect someone who joined the military after the Fall.”

“I think it might be a bit early to claim that they’re the spies,” Moblit said. “But I do agree that they’re suspicious.”

“Like that toothpick thing,” Levi said. “You don’t just get stabbed through the hand by accident.”

“That leads me to my next point,” Hange said. “That other girl, Ymir.”

“Whatever you’re about to say, I probably agree with you,” Mike replied. “She’s acting shady as fuck.”

“Do you think she had some connection to that Titan?” Moblit wondered. “I mean, it *did* say her name.”

“How?” Levi asked. “The only way that could’ve happened is if she met the Titan before, they had a chat, and she walked away scot-free. The kid’s what, sixteen? She’s never even been outside the Walls before—how could the Titan know about her?”

“But think about it,” Mike said. “Ilse Langar—she *did* kind of look like Ymir. You know, what with the hair, and the freckles.”

“Those three could’ve very well been discussing her during their time in the bathroom,” Erwin said.

“You think they know something about her, too?” Hange asked, scribbling down the note in their notebook and drawing a circle around it.

“At this point, I don’t know *what* they know and don’t know,” Levi said. “But I do know this: there’s a shitton of secrets being kept by a shitton of liars, and, whatever those secrets are, they definitely don’t want them getting out.”

Episode — 4: The Night of the Closing Ceremony: Humanity's Comeback, Part 2

"I'm really starting to hate that fucking gong," Gunther groaned, wincing and rubbing his forehead as he sulked down the hall.

"Seconded," Eld muttered, running his fingers through his hair as he pulled it into a loose ponytail. "This is a fancy-ass place with, like, magic technology. They can't find a way to call us downstairs with*out* bursting our damn eardrums?"

"She gets her kicks from it, as far as I'm concerned," Gunther snorted. "You know, I bet she's just like those psycho people on the Homepage."

"What do you mean?" Eld asked.

"You know," Gunther said. "Those fucking *storytellers*, or whatever they call them. She enjoys watching people suffer," he added when Eld still looked confused.

Eld huffed, exhaling through his nose as they made their way down the stairs. "Pretty sure that's called sadism, buddy."

"The hell, man?" Gunther laughed. "I don't want to know about your weird-ass sex things!"

Eld kicked playfully at his ankles, and Gunther flipped him off, chuckling. "Whatever, man. Let's just get back to the psycho show."

Rain fell from the grey, cloud-darkened sky, *pitter-patter*ing on the ground and dripping from the barbed wires of an old fence as the camera panned up over the dark, pine woods.

Year 850*, the words at the bottom of the screen helpfully explained. *Two years after joining the Cadets.

"Oh!" Sasha gasped. "We're graduating, soon!"

"This must be the last episode of cadets, then," Armin said.

"Finally," Levi muttered.

"Maybe for us," Mike muttered back. "Remember what happened after this?"

Levi furrowed his brow. "Well, fuck."

"Pick up the pace, you lead-heeled laggards!" A group of cadets ran through the woods, hoods of their cloaks pulled tightly over their heads, clutching tightly onto the straps of their backpacks as they rand, heads ducked, through the rain, mud *squelch*ing as they pulled their boots from the soft, wet ground.

"*Oh*." Connie wrinkled his nose. "I remember this."

"They're still doing that, are they?" Moblit sighed.

"Really, I don't see the point," Gunther said. "I mean, really, when are you ever going to be running through the mud and rain? We've got the horses outside the Walls, and everyone else. . . well, the other branches never really go outside, do they?" Annie grimaced slightly, remembering her first (and, hopefully, last, mission for the MPs).

"Well, there's always the chance that you could get stranded without a horse outside the Walls," Petra offered. "Remember Ilse Langar?" (Four people tried very hard to sit still, more than aware of the watchful gazes in the room.)

"Your boots waterlogged, Arlert?" Shadis demanded from his perch atop his horse, glaring down at the short, blonde boy. "Let's see some hustle!" Armin panted, soaked bangs hanging in sopping strands around his face.

Armin's cheeks flushed; the last thing he had wanted was for his friends and new superiors to see his weakness. *Can't hide anything from the TV, can you?* he thought ruefully. *Good to know*.

Shadis yanked on his horse's reins, drawing back so he was next to Armin. "Gear too heavy for you, son? Hell, drop it! Leave it in the mud!" Sweat and rain ran down Armin's face, chest heaving and shoulder straining against the weight of his bag. "The Titans'll have easier work digesting you without all that extra garbage," Shadis snarled before snapping his reins, catching up with the rest of the group.

Hange wrinkled their nose at the sight of the massive gap between Armin and the rest of the group. *I kind of gathered that he wasn't exactly an athlete, but that's just sad*. They glanced at the red-faced blonde out of the corner of their eye. *He does seem pretty brainy, though*. . . They perked up suddenly, a fresh idea popping up in their mind. *Maybe he'd be interested in research, instead? I'm sure Moblit would appreciate more breaks*. . .

"Damnit," Armin gasped, words strained and breathless. "Seriously?"

"Here." Armin started, eyes widening, as the weight was suddenly lifted from his spine. "Focus on staying upright," Reiner told him, slinging the smaller blonde's bag over his right shoulder, shifting his own to his left. "We are being graded on this, you know?"

A few people, despite their best efforts, glanced at Armin and Reiner out of the corners of their eyes. *He didn't really cheat, did he?* Petra wondered.

Armin's face grew even redder. "He didn't," Reiner said suddenly. "Grabbed the bag off my back and ran ahead, actually," he added with a small chuckle. Armin shot him a grateful glance, receiving a thumbs-up from the taller boy.

"Thanks," Armin panted, straightening his back slightly. "But won't they demerit you for helping?"

"Yeah," Reiner replied. "If they find out. Just make the cut and we're even, all right?"

He didn't actually cheat, Erwin thought, *but Reiner didn't know he'd take the bag back. His dedication to his comrades is impressive*.

Unbeknownst to the boys, Shadis was watching the entire exchange, listening to their conversation from where he rode ahead. *Reiner Braun*.

"He knew?" Armin asked, surprised. "Why didn't he do anything?"

"No clue." Reiner was just as surprised. "Seems like something he'd be more than happy to yell at us for, normally. Or even kick us out, if he's feeling it."

The image froze as Reiner surged forwards, glancing over his shoulder to make sure Armin was keeping up, teeth grit with determination. *The mind and constitution of a grass-fed ox. Respected by his comrades*.

Krista gasped. "Are these our evaluations?" she asked.

The rest of the cadets, as well as a few veterans, shifted forwards curiously. While they had received their scores for their different courses and their final rankings, they had never before seen the comments, or Shadis's evaluations.

The images began moving again, and Reiner charged ahead, Armin barely staying on his feet behind him.

"I'm no one's burden, you hear me?" Armin breathed, voice rising into a shout as he ran ahead, grabbing the bag from Reiner's shoulder and charging ahead, bursting past Franz and Hannah.

"Go, Armin!" Sasha cheered.

"Shit, man!" Jean said. "You sure can move when you want to." Armin flushed, and Eren laughed, patting him good-naturedly on the shoulder.

Armin Arlert*. The image froze again, Armin's mouth open as he panted for breath, but still running. *Built like a daffodil—

Armin groaned, putting his face in his hands. Ymir snorted loudly, and Krista smacked her elbow.

—but *academically brilliant.*

Jean raised an eyebrow. "Did he just manage to compliment *and* insult you in the same breath?"

Sasha chuckled. "That's Shadis for you."

"He sure has gotten soft," Levi scoffed.

"I don't know," Moblit chuckled. "If you want my opinion—"

"No."

"—this is like a blast from the past!" Hange continued, grinning.

The music picked up, wood and ropes creaked as Titan silhouettes were raised above the mossy forest floor, casting harsh shadows onto the trunks of the nearby trees as the sunlight struck them from above.

"This is a different day, isn't it?" Erwin asked, nodding at the sun streaming through the branches.

"The TV must be summarizing our entire finals week," Eren said.

"Who else's summaries do you think we'll see?" Krista wondered.

"Probably the rest of us," Sasha said, waving her pointer finger around in the general area of the cadets. "Ya know, since we're the 'main characters.'"

"*Keep your weapons aimed*. . ."

Wires whipped through the air as Bertolt, Annie, and Jean shot towards the silhouette, swords out.

Jean leaned forwards, elbows resting on his knees, curious to know what Shadis had really thought about him.

"*Here comes the chilling face*. . ."

Annie's eyes flashed as she rocketed down from above, Bertolt barely a second behind her. Two flashes of light cut through a dark screen, and dust drifted through the air as two chunks of the false nape fell to the ground.

Erwin raised his eyebrows as the cadets cheered for their friends. *I knew Leonhart was impressive, but I wasn't expecting Hoover to be so brutal, either*, he thought. *Though*, he considered*, he* was *in the top ten, too.* He frowned. *Number three, wasn't it?* He glanced at the two recruits in the back of the room, both of whom looked less than happy to be the centre of attention.

Jean swung his own blades, taking out a chunk about a half of the size of the previous two.

Eren guffawed loudly, slapping his knee. "Don't worry, Jean," he snickered. "You'll get there, one day."

"Like you were any better," Jean snapped, face flushed. "We haven't even heard my evaluation, yet! 'Sides, I bet you didn't even graze the nape!"

"Like you'd know—" Eren snapped his jaw shut, cheeks blazing furiously as Armin tugged vainly at his sleeve, trying to force him back into his seat.

The smaller piece joined the larger ones on the ground as Jean shot after Annie and Bertolt, teeth clenched in frustration. The image froze, showing the three of them hovering in the air.

"You guys look like a squad," Connie commented.

***Annie Leonhart*. Annie glanced over her shoulder, eyeing the slaughtered "Titan" with bored disinterest. *Gifted with a sword, but does not exactly play well with others*.**

Gifted, indeed. Mike thought back to the last OVA. *As if every stroke she brought down were full of killing intent*.

***Bertolt Hoover*. Despite Jean having arrived last, he was at the back of the group, swords out at either side of him. *Heaps of native talent but too mild-mannered*.**

"Aw." Petra suppressed a giggle as the cadets chuckled at their friend's evaluation.

"Imagine," Gunther chuckled, "being called out by Shadis for being to shy."

I'm surprised he didn't just call him out as a doormat, Levi thought.

***Jean Kirschtein*. Jean's entire face was screwed up with fury, evidently enraged by his performance.**

Jean spluttered as the other cadets howled with laughter. "Wha— How come *they* get to look so good?"

“You look fucking constipated!” Ymir screeched, clutching her stomach, tears of mirth staining her cheeks.

“This is unfair!” Jean protested. “I’m being victimized over here!”

***Head of the class on ODM, also an insufferable smartass with a hair-trigger temper*. Keith stood on a platform nailed to a tree, making notes on a clipboard as he watched the cadets swinging through the woods.**

“Head of class?” Erwin glanced at Jean. “Impressive.” *Though I would have expected that title to have gone to Ackerman, instead*.

Jean puffed out his chest, looking overtly pleased at the praise. “Thank you, sir!”

“God, what a suckup,” Ymir snorted, taking a long swig of beer (She had found during the last break, to her disappointment, that, despite tasting the same, the drinks in the kitchen cabinet were all non-alcoholic).

Jean kicked off of a tree branch before taking flight again, glowering over his shoulder. “Think those show-offs can slice and dice?” he snarled. “Best hope you see a Titan before I do!”

“I’m getting OVA flashbacks,” Eld joked. Jean turned red at the memory, quietly lowering his face into his palms.

“Oh, Jean-Boy,” Connie snickered. “When will you learn?”

“When will *you?*” Jean spat. “Fuckin’ cueball.” Connie snorted, punching his shoulder lightly.

His wires screeched against his mechanism as he rocketed through the woods, dodging trees left and right at whiplash-inducing speeds. *Military Police. . .* He drew his swords. *Save a place for Jean!*

“You had the opportunity to,” Moblit said. “You all did. So why didn’t you?”

The cadets exchanged uneasy glances, and Krista rubbed her arm nervously. “I think—” Sasha began, before coughing into his fist.

“We all saw shit,” Jean stated bluntly. “At Trost. And, well. . . for most of us, it seemed impossible to turn our backs on it all and head into the Interior.”

Erwin nodded slowly, turning back to the TV. “I see.”

He burst through the branches, grinning as another silhouette loomed from between the trees.

“Way to lead the charge!” Jean started as another figure darted past him in a blur. “You don’t care if I steal your thunder, right?” Connie grinned, swinging under the “Titan’s” neck. There was a clash of metal on metal, and a carved-out chunk of the “nape” fell to the ground.

“This really is just a repeat of the OVA!” Gunther laughed.

Petra burst out laughing, hands flying up to cover her mouth. “I’m sorry!” she exclaimed, shoulder shaking. “That’s gotta suck, but—oh, my Rose!” She giggled even harder at the sight of Jean’s mortified face.

“Hold on—” Oluo began fishing around in his pocket. “I’ll bet five gold pieces that Sasha’s swooping in right after him!”

“I’ll take that bet!” Connie said quickly.

“Wha—no way!” Oluo protested. “You were there, you know what’s gonna happen!”

“Too late!” Connie exclaimed gleefuly.

Connie made a noise of surprise as Sasha barreled past, laughing.

Connie hopped out of his seat, skipping towards Oluo and snatching the coins from his hand. “Thank you!”

“Wait—!” Oluo stared after Connie as he danced back to his seat and flopped onto the couch, eyes wide and mouth hanging open in dismay and horror. “That’s my only spending money for the month. . .” he trailed off sadly.

“Well, you shouldn’t have made a dumb bet like that,” Petra chided. “Especially in a room full of people who *literally* know what’s going to happen.”

Mike raised an eyebrow as he watched the banter. “Isn’t there a rule in the Corps about gambling?” he asked, turning to Erwin. “You know—the one where it’s not allowed?”

“Hm?” Erwin looked equally amused, watching as Connie flipped a gold coin into the air, catching it in his other hand and proudly showing Sasha his handful of pieces. “Well, technically, we’re not in the Corps right now—or even in our universe. So I don’t see the problem with them having some fun.”

Mike grinned. “Does that mean you wouldn’t be opposed to a good, old-fashioned game of cards?”

“Did someone say cards?” Hange swivelled around, practically twisting their head a full 180 degrees (“What the fuck kind of demon are you, and which part of hell did you crawl out of?” Levi demanded).

“Squad Leader. . .” Moblit sighed.

“Looks like we’ve got a little party going,” Mike chuckled. “What about you, Levi? You in?”

“Only ‘cause I know I’m gonna wipe the floor with you dipshits,” Levi snorted.

“It’s settled,” Hange declared. “The moment we’re done for the day, I’m gonna bust the fuck out of this apartment and look over the entire branch for a pack of cards.”

“I don’t think you can do that. . .” Moblit began.

“I’m gonna do it.”

“Squad Leader—”

“I’m gonna do it.

“Yee-ha!” She threw her arms out as she fell, wires catching her just before she hit the ground and launching her back up into the air like a slingshot.

“Oh, my god,” Petra’s hand flew up to her chest. “You could have snapped your spine!” (“And I would have thrown a party,” Ymir grumbled. “Ow!” She jumped as Krista slapped her arm, frowning.)

“Nah!” Sasha grinned. “I’m used to climbing ‘round the trees—ODM just makes everything easier!”

“That’s seriously impressive,” Eld told her. Normally, flying with ODM was serious business, requiring the utmost concentration and focus, even for someone who’d spent years practicing. But the ways Sasha did it made it look effortless—fun, even.

“Is it crazy that I kind of want to try that?” Eren asked.

“Yes,” Mikasa replied.

***Sasha Braus*. Sasha threw her arms above her head, still laughing. *Unusually fine instincts. Rarely shares them with her teammates*.**

“Clearly,” Jean said, “Shadis wasn’t there during the training exercise.”

“Well,” Eren said, “she really *doesn’t* say anything, during normal circumstances.”

“Not true!” Sasha crossed her arms, tilting her chin up. “I do share! Just not when we’re in immediate danger of dying.”

“You—!” Jean threw his hands into the air, exasperated.

***Connie Springer*. Connie stared at her, jaw slack, confused. *Agile on the switchbacks, but a few sandwiches shy of a picnic*.**

“You can’t even argue with that,” Sasha teased.

“Just because he didn’t call you an idiot outright—!” Connie began.

“You just admitted that you’re an idiot,” Ymir snorted.

“Yeah, ‘cause it’s *true*, but what about her—?”

While I agree with Shadis that they’re not exactly geniuses, Erwin thought, *he doesn’t seem to be giving them as much credit as they deserve for their skills*—especially *if they managed to survive Trost*.

“Get ready,” a clipboard-holding man instructed his partner. He nodded, pulling hard on a rope in his hands, wood of the pulley systems creaking and moaning as the Titan silhouette turned slowly, rotating on their pedestals.

Mikasa flew forwards, eyes narrowed as she raised her blades.

“Alright!” Sasha leaned forwards, grinning. “It’s Mikasa’s turn!”

Levi narrowed his eyes, leaning forwards by a fraction of an inch as the other cadets cheered. *Let’s see what all the excitement’s about*.

Two flashes of light blurred through the woods, and a chunk of false nape from each of the two “Titans” in the clearing fell to the ground—both of them sliced clean through within the space of a second.

Hange's eyes widened, spectacles slipping lower down their nose. *I knew she was fast, but that*. . . They glanced at Levi, noticing a similar expression of shock in his eyes, though his face gave nothing away. *It's like they're not even human!*

"She's practically the same speed as the Captain!" Petra gasped.

"I know!" Eld whispered back.

Eren shouted as he swung his own swords wildly, taking out a smaller chunk, barely a nip compared to the deep canyons Mikasa had left in her wake. *Damnit!* He glared over his shoulder as he shot away. *Still not as deep as Mikasa's!*

"You've gotta stop comparing yourself to her," Jean said. "I mean, c'mon—she flipped *Reiner* like a ragdoll, and he's got, like, 60 pounds on her!"

"I'm starting to think you're not even human," Sasha laughed. "Either that, or you've got superpowers!"

"No." Mikasa didn't look away from the TV. "I'm just strong."

Understatement of the century. Eld stared at her. *How is that—how is* she*—even possible?*

Mikasa Ackerman*. Mikasa's hair and scarf billowed in the wind as she turned, watching Eren. *Model cadet. Excels in everything. In fact, it's no overstatement to call the girl a genius.

That's far from an overstatement, Mike thought. *Where does her strength come from? Basic logic says that half of what she does should be impossible—when she cut out those napes, it was like they needed a second to register that they'd been cut*.

There's definitely something important about her, Hange watched the impassive, dark-haired girl from the corner of her eye as they wrote *MIKASA ACKERMAN* in large, defined letters, underlining and circling it a few times for emphasis. *The question is: will the TV show us what it is, or are we going to have to guess?*

Eren Jaeger*. Eren was still grinding his teeth as she swung away from the silhouettes. *Lackluster in the classroom, marginally better in the field.

"What?" Eren's jaw dropped at the scathing remark.

"But then how'd he score in the top ten?" Jean demanded.

"I call bullshit!" Sasha yelled.

Shadis turned his head, watching as Eren shot through the trees. *But driven by a sense of purpose that's almost terrifying*.

"Ain't that the truth," Ymir muttered.

Terrifying is right. Mikasa glanced at him from the corner of her eye. *What I'm worried about is how far he'll go*. She closed her eyes at the memories of the Battle of Trost; those horrible minutes when she'd been sure that Eren had been gone, the overwhelming dread—as if, without Eren, her own life was draining out of her, leaving an empty shell behind. *He doesn't know when to stop—and that truly scares me*.

Eren reared back, propelling himself forwards with a massive burst of gas. He let out a shout as he shot into the air, teeth gritted and glaring at the sky.

"Wait." Eren frowned as the scene faded. "What about Marco? And Ymir, and Krista?"

An awkward silence fell as the soldiers glanced at each other. Hange cleared their throat, looking down, and Ymir bit the inside of her cheek, brows furrowed. "I know we're all thinking it," Marco said quietly, "so I'll say it: Hajime Isayama probably never meant for me to live, so he just didn't bother showing my evaluation." Jean grimaced, and Armin lowered his head, tapping a finger anxiously on the armrest of the couch.

"And Ymir and Krista?" Eren persisted.

"I. . . don't know," Marco admitted.

"Do you think the story has other plans for them?" Armin asked. Both girls stiffened, so wrapped up in their own panicked thoughts that they didn't notice the alarm of the other.

"That would make sense," Erwin said. *What, though? And just how will it affect the rest of you?*

Sunlight sparkled off the surface of the bright blue lake, the criss-crossing lines of the barbed wire fencing marking the scenery in sharp, twisted crosshatches. Boots pounded on the ground as Reiner charged at Eren, shouting, holding a wooden knife at his side.

"Oh," Eren groaned. "It's *this* thing."

"Ah." Sasha grimaced. "I remember that."

"Same here." Ymir grinned wickedly at the screen. "Oh, this is gonna be great."

"What?" Jean asked.

"You snuck off during this exercise, didn't you?" Jean nodded, and Ymir's grin widened. "Oh, this is gonna be fun."

Eren grit his teeth, holding up two hands and catching Reiner in the chest. The older boy shouted, the camera swerving wildly, moving at his point of view, as he was thrown over Eren's shoulder, landing on the ground with a loud *thump*.

Eld whistled, clapping. "Not bad."

"I mean," Oluo sniffed, "you could always do better; me, personally, I would have—"

"Don't start," Petra sighed.

"Argh!" Reiner grimaced as Eren dropped his arm, turning to lie on his back.

A few people chuckled at Reiner's expression. "Man, I hated hand-to-hand combat," Connie laughed.

"Sorry, man." Eren held a hand out. "I've really gotta learn to hold back."

Eren turned red at the sound of his own words, scratching, embarrassed, at the back of his head as the cadets snickered, mimics of the phrase tossed around the room.

"'Hold back,'" Ymir sneered. "If that ever happens, I'll eat my shoe."

"I'm holding you to that," Jean said.

"Bring it on, you little shit."

"Eh, it's all right." Reiner grabbed his hand, and the brunette hoisted him up. "Now you be the bad guy." He held the wooden knife out, holding it by the handle. "What are you waiting for?" he asked when Eren didn't take it immediately.

"This training doesn't make any sense," Eren grumbled, taking it. He held it up, looking at the roughly hewn, age-worn blade. "We're not exactly picking fights with someone our own size."

"Maybe you're not planning to do that," Moblit said. "But not every cadet chooses the Corps—in fact, most of them would rather do anything *but* that."

"He's right." Gunther nodded. "The Garrison might not have to deal with people as much, but they do have to break up fights and riots a lot, especially during evacuation drills."

"That's not to mention the MPs," Petra chimed in. "They literally deal with criminals—they'd be pretty useless if they couldn't even do basic hand-to-hand."

"They're pretty useless, already," Levi grumbled. Annie frowned, but didn't say anything.

Eren's gaze was blank and distant as he turned the knife in his hands. "A guy'd have to be stupid to use this. I mean, a knife?"

Levi's eye twitched. *What would you know?*

An image flashed onto the screen, disappearing just as fast: a young boy in a red sweater and scarf, with messy brown hair, standing over a fallen body with a broom handle sticking out of its back.

Both Eren and Mikasa stiffened as shouts filled the room, and Armin exhaled sharply through his nose.

"Tha—that's Eren, isn't it?" Sasha exclaimed, alarmed.

"Is that a *body?*" Jean's jaw was hanging open. "Holy shit—did you *kill* someone?"

"It's none of your business," Mikasa said coldly, effectively silencing the conversation, though curious glances were still sent their way, gazes full of questions and concern—and, in the case of three sets of eyes in the back row, wariness.

Eren pursed his lips. "What if there's not an option?" Reiner asked. Eren glanced up. "The fight doesn't give us a say," Reiner told him, his own brows furrowed. "If it wants to get ugly, it gets ugly. It's our job to be prepared." Eren blinked, perturbed at the sudden, serious turn of the man who was normally so jovial.

And what if we had been properly prepared five years ago? Moblit wondered, not for the first time. *Or would it have been impossible?* After all, who could have predicted a Titan taller than the Walls?

"The enemy comes in many forms." In another part of the yard, a dark-haired girl struck Samuel in the face, holding his knife away from her. "Artillery's not always going to be the answer."

It shouldn't. Erwin sighed. *Humanity hasn't any spare resources to waste on our petty battles within the Walls. The real threat is the world outside the Walls, and the enemies that have taken it. But*, he rubbed his forehead, *there will always be those who choose to focus on themselves and their own selfish goals before the rest of humanity. Though*. . . He nearly chuckled outright. *Am I really any different?* He shook his head ruefully with a small sigh.

"Hey." Levi glanced at him, frowning. "What the hell are you groaning about over there?"

"Nothing," Erwin replied. "Just a thought."

Levi's cocked brow informed him of his transparent lie, but the other man didn't say anything else, simply turning back to the TV.

Reiner's gaze went past Eren as he continued speaking, just as lost in his own thoughts as Eren was in his words. "Soldiers, the ones worth their salt, anyways, are ready for anything."

That's heavy, Sasha thought, frowning.

I know he witnessed his village's destruction firsthand, Hange thought, frowning, *but the way he's talking. . . it's like he's already fought a hundred battles*.

Eren blinked up at him, eyes wide. Reiner smiled faintly, coming back to himself as he glanced off to the side. "Don't believe me? Look."

Annie walked alone through the yard, ignoring the fighting couples around her. "Yeah?" Eren asked. "What about her?" Eren and Reiner watched as she weaved her way through the people, sparing nobody a second glance. "Only thing she's looking for is a chance to slack off."

"Dude. . ." Jean groaned.

"Wha—you were all thinking it, too!" Eren defended himself.

"Actually, no," Ymir said drily. "Because the rest of us don't stick our noses in everybody else's business and screech at them for every little thing."

"Okay, that's overexaggerating it a bit—"

"Guys?" Armin sighed. "Can we *not* have this argument for the millionth time?"

"Fine." Ymir rolled her eyes, flopping back in the beanbag chair. "I'm right, though," she added quietly as Eren turned away.

"Hey—!" Eren whipped around, looking ready to throw himself over the back of the sofa and march over to where she sat.

"Sit down!" a good half of the room chorused.

"But—!"

"*Sit down!*"

"You think so?" Reiner grinned. "Maybe someone ought to give her a talking to." His eyes were narrowed deviously as he watched her movements. "Give her a little hard knock lesson in preparedness."

“Huh?” Eren stared at him.

“So *that’s* how it happened!” Connie cried. “C’mon, Reiner, were you really *that* dumb? You shoulda known you were digging yourself into a hole.”

Annie kept her eyes fixed on the ground as she walked, gaze passing over the dust and stones impassively. She turned her face ahead, pausing and looking up as she found herself face-to-midriff with Reiner. “Commandant not beat you down enough?” he asked. “Keep it up, and you’ll be as flat as the dirt you’re walking on. You don’t want to get any shorter, do you?”

Petra slapped her forehead. “Oh, my god,” she sighed.

Reiner smirked. “I suggest you think back to why you enlisted in the first place.”

Hange frowned. *That’s. . . an odd thing to say*, they thought. *Is he trying to remind her of her goal to join the Military Police? But, even if he is, why would he say it like that?*

“Hey, what are you doing?” Eren asked, walking forwards. He turned, and nearly jumped out of his skin.

Annie glared ferociously at Reiner, eyes blue as ice, and a thousand times colder, entire face shadowed as she glowered at him.

Sasha shuddered. *I wouldn’t want to be Reiner right now*, she thought. *Or—back then, I guess. She looks ready to kill!*

***Woah*. Eren thought. *She’s pissed. Wow, I thought she looked scary before*. He gulped. *You couldn’t pay me enough to be on her bad side*.**

“Same here.” Connie nodded fervently. “Uh—no offense, Annie.”

“None taken,” she replied quietly.

Why the glare? Mike wondered. *She doesn’t seem the type to be easily upset about these kinds of things. But the way she’s looking at him. . . it’s like he personally wronged her on a whole other level*.

Eren’s inner monologue was interrupted as Reiner creeped up behind him. The brunette jumped as Reiner dropped his hands on his shoulders. “Okay!” He declared. “Now, go get her!”

The cadets exploded into laughter.

“‘Go get her’?” Ymir cackled, slapping her knee. “You bastard—you’re the one who challenged her in the first place!”

“Yeah, well, Eren started it!” Reiner defended, holding his hands up in front of him, laughing easily with the others.

“What do you mean?” Sasha howled gleefully, banging her fist on the armrest of the couch. “*You* pointed her out!”

“Huh?” Eren stumbled as Reiner pushed him forwards. “What the hell? Wait!”

“Poor Eren,” Sasha giggled.

Annie narrowed her eyes, raising her fists up in front of her and shifting a foot back. Eren got into his own fighting stance, a nervous bead of sweat on his temple. "Right." He clenched the handle of the knife. "I hope you don't expect me to hold back."

"Didn't you just say you needed to practice holding back?" Jean snickered.

"Don't mind him," Sasha laughed. "He's just trying to act tough."

"I am *not!*" Eren protested.

"You totally are," Ymir said.

Eren charged forwards, the wooden prop held out in front of him. "Head up!"

Annie, without a second's hesitation, jabbed a fist forwards and kicked out, striking Eren's shin sharply with her own foot and sending him tumbling to the ground with a startled shout.

"Oh!" Hange perked up. "That's the move your father taught you! Right?"

"Ugh, son of a. . ." Eren pushed himself off the ground, grimacing. "That was a dirty move!"

"There's no such thing as a 'dirty move'," Levi said. "Everything's valid in a fight."

"You would know," Mikasa hissed.

Levi's gaze sharpened. "What was that?"

"Nothing," she nearly spat out. "*Sir*."

The rest of the training yard had fallen silent, the other cadets watching as Eren tried to stand up, only to fall flat on his rump with a hiss of pain, shin throbbing. "Are we done here?" Annie asked, turning away.

"That was badass," Sasha breathed.

"Not just yet," Reiner said, standing in front of her. "You know the drill, take up the dagger."

"Why, Reiner?" Eren groaned. "Why?"

Annie sighed, turning to look back at Eren. "No, wait!" Eren protested, holding the knife up feebly in front of him. "This isn't how. . ." Annie advanced on him, eyes blank and cold. "Oh, crap."

"*Not* funny!" Eren yelled.

"Oh, trust me, it is," Ymir snickered.

Annie grabbed his arms, and, with strength unseen for a girl so small, flipped him over her shoulder, kicking him in the back. Eren landed on the ground with a *thump*, legs thrown over his torso, rump in the air.

"Oh, my god, Eren!" Eld snorted.

"I didn't know contortionism was part of your skillset," Gunther snickered.

"Is that another move your father taught you?" Krista asked

"Yeah," Annie nodded.

"That's so cool!" Sasha exclaimed. "Your father must be a great fighter!"

"He used to be," Annie agreed.

"Used to be?" Ymir raised an eyebrow.

"I—he injured his leg," Annie explained.

Reiner stared at Eren's limp form on the ground, eyes wide, sweat dripping from his cheeks. "There," Annie stated, tossing the dagger to him. "So," she said, brushing a strand of hair from her face. "You ready to take me on yourself yet, or what?"

"Oh, shit!" Sasha laughed.

"It always comes back to bite you in the ass," Connie chuckled.

"Uh—" Reiner gulped, lowering the knife. "Uh, not exactly."

"Hypocrite," Eren snorted.

"Don't you dare." Reiner started at the monotonous voice, looking down at the brunette sprawled at is feet. Eren stared up at him with the blank, soulless eyes of a demon, dark green depths promising nothing less than eternal torment. "She's got a lesson coming, right? You go get her."

"Sina's tits!" Eld yelped.

"You are one scary guy," Gunther chuckled uneasily.

"I don't know what scares me more," Connie joked. "Annie when she's mad, or Eren right now."

Reiner looked back at Annie, who was watching the proceedings with evident disinterest. "Yeah." Reiner nodded stiffly and closed his eyes, cold sweat drenching his shirt collar.

"Not so easy now, huh?" Eren asked darkly.

"It was months ago!" Reiner protested. "Can't you just let it go?"

"Not a chance."

Wind blew past as he spoke, whistling in the background. "A soldier can't really afford to back down, either." He opened his eyes, brimming with steely resolve. "Get ready, here I come—!"

***Thump!* Annie walked away from where Reiner lay, flopped on the ground just like Eren had been before him.**

The howling had reached a point where it sounded like the room was full of overexcited wolves.

"And she just walks away!" Jean hooted.

"Her skills are impeccable," Mike said.

Moblit nodded. "The technique she's using. . . it uses her size and the other person's own body to her advantage, so she can flip even someone twice her size."

Yes. Erwin frowned. *But why would her father teach her these? And so many, too? Going off the way she talks about him, he's obviously not a soldier: so why did he know how to fight so well? And, more importantly, why teach her?*

“That’s some technique you got.” Annie stopped at Eren’s words, brushing a stand of hair from her eyes. “Who taught you how to fight like that?”

“My father did,” she replied.

“Did he, like, pioneer it, or. . .”

“Did he?” Krista wondered. Annie didn’t respond.

“Does it really matter?” she asked, turning to look at him. Eren blinked at her abrupt interruption. “It’s pointless, just like all of this is.”

Sasha furrowed her brows. “What do you mean?” Again, Annie remained silent.

“She’ll probably explain,” Jean said, nodding at the screen.

“Wait,” Eren said, “you mean the training in general?”

Annie turned her face away, looking at the other cadets in the yard. “Hand-to-hand combat doesn’t really count against our final grade,” she said. In another part of the yard, Jean lead a tired-looking Nack away by his arm.

Snickers filled the room at the sight of the boys’ faces. “What the hell are you doing?” Ymir laughed.

“You look like such a snob!” Sasha guffawed.

“The smart ones blow it off. It’s crapshoot, anyways.” She watched as the two walked off, eyes distant, face closed off. “Only the top ten cadets get to serve in the interior. The rest of us?” Eren watched, almost fascinated as she spoke. “Forget it.”

Heavy, but true, Hange thought. *She’s blunt, and to the point. Though*, they frowned, *it is curious that she’s so adamant about this.*

“Point is. . .” In yet another corner of the yard, Marco grappled a rifle-toting Franz to the ground. “Only the idiots like you take this part of boot camp seriously.” Near the centre of the yard, Mikasa dodged out of the way as Krista charged towards her with the dagger, moving faster than the blonde girl could register.

“I wouldn’t say that they’re *idiots*,” Petra said. “Even if it doesn’t count for marks—or not many, at least—you should still know the basics.”

“And, plus,” Eld said. “The top ten always—well, most of the time, anyways—go to the Interior. You’re an MP, right?” She nodded. “Have you ever used hand-to-hand combat for a job?”

“Once,” she replied, “but I think you’re overestimating the MPs. There isn’t a single superior who expects to go out at any point in the day and work, and nearly all of the new recruits have already settled into the mundane buzz of life. Except for one, but he’s an idiot.”

“Like us?” Eren asked, raising an eyebrow.

“Yeah.”

“I’m surprised that you’re saying all that,” Krista said. “I mean, you *are* an MP—”

"Because I wanted to survive," she said. "It has nothing to do with loyalty; king and country, I don't care about any of it. But I'll do what I have to to stay alive, and, if that includes playing their obedient puppet, so be it."

Erwin's frown deepened as he listened to her talk. *She's honest,* he thought. *Brutally so. Fatalistic, as well. Could it all be because of what she saw when the Wall fell? Or is there something else?* He shook his head. *Or I could just be reading too much into it; nevertheless, it's still a good idea to make note of everything*.

"Idiots and whatever they are." Sasha and Connie stood near the fence, Sasha, with her arms held up in a V over her head, balancing on one foot, and Connie, bent at the knees, arms held up like a praying mantis in front of him, the dagger clutched between his teeth.

"Those are the same moves you used in that food OVA, right?" Eld asked. He shook his head with a small sigh when they nodded. "God, you guys are idiots."

"Even Annie agrees," Jean said mockingly. Sasha elbowed him playfully, sticking her tongue out at him.

"Oh." Connie looked up as Shadis approached them. "Hello, sir—"

"How are you alive?" Eld marvelled.

The screen turned black for a split second as a loud *whap* sounded through the room, and the image reappeared, with the other cadets staring as Shadis held Connie, suspended off the ground, gripping his skull. Sasha's entire body was quivering in fear, arms held straight up in surrender, both feet on the ground, knees knocking against each other.

Chuckles resounded through the room, the soldiers thankful for the small helping of comedy in the serious atmosphere.

"How many times has that happened?" Petra asked.

"Honestly?" Jean chuckled. "Enough times that it'd became an old hat."

"You shouldn't be okay after that," Gunther said, shaking his head.

Annie suddenly darted forwards, holding the blade of the wooden knife up to Eren's throat before he could even react.

She's fast, Erwin thought. *All of them are. But. . . not even Ackerman moves like her. The others are exceptional soldiers, but still new. She's. . . well, it's like she's already battle-hardened*.

"First rule of life, kid," she said as Eren stared, a fist half-raised and shaking. "The better you are at dropping the bad guys, the more distance the powers that be put between you." Eren's eyes locked with hers, almost frighteningly bright, compared to their previous dullness, as she continued speaking. "That's what this whole stupid farce is about."

She sure has got it all figured out, huh? Mike frowned. *But why? If she's so interested in staying alive, wouldn't keeping her nose out of politics better help ensure her survival? Or does she just have a curious nature?* He frowned. *No. . . something tells me that's not it. Maybe I'm*

just on edge from all the crazy stuff that's happened today, but I have a feeling that there's more to her words than first meets the eye.

"Sure," Eren said, leaning forwards. "Whatever you say!" He raised his voice into a shout, shoving her away and grabbing her wrist, yanking her forwards.

Annie grunted as she tugged her arm back, kicking his ankles out from beneath him. Eren let out a wheezing gasp as he landed flat on his back, the wind knocked out of him.

A few people gasped at the sudden exchange of power. "You almost had her!" Krista said encouragingly.

"He really didn't," Ymir chuckled.

"Be nice!"

He had little time to recover though, as the blade was suddenly pointed at his neck again, Annie locking her knees on either side of his ribs. "Face it." Annie's arms shook as Eren grabbed her wrists, forcing the blade away from his neck. "You don't fight the nature of things and win."

Mikasa's eye twitched at the position the two were in, fingers twitching as she curled her hand into a fist.

Eren's eyes were wide as he stared at the knife—wooden and fake or not, it could still cause a lot of damage if she drove it into his jugular with the speed and force she harnessed. Annie closed her eyes, slowly standing up. "Look around you, Eren," she said as he stared up at her from the ground. "All the sons of bitches really expect us to do is play the game. Don't be a pawn."

Good advice. Levi's lip curled. *Not quite that easy to follow, though*.

"Why tell him that?" Reiner asked, voice low.

"What does it matter?" she hissed back. "It's not like telling him that'll clue him into anything. Besides," she added in a low snarl. "*I'm* not the one getting all buddy-buddy with them."

Reiner narrowed his eyes. "Really?" he shot back. "Who was the one who risked her own life to save one of *them*? I asked you back then, but you never gave me an answer: you *do* remember *why* we joined, right?"

"I remember," she snapped. "Trust me, I'm not stopping just for sentiment; the evidence is sitting right next to Jean."

Eren sat up, staring at her as she walked away. "Yeah, well. . ." Reiner didn't stop her this time, letting her leave as Eren stood. "I still stand by what I said earlier." He looked back at Eren, but the brunette didn't respond.

***I've been so fixated on building myself up, I couldn't see it*. Eren's eyes were wide as the truth of Annie's words began to sink in. *She's absolutely right*. Eren lowered his head, clenching his fists. *They're not honing their skills to fight. They're honing their skills to* run.**

"Wow," Oluo scoffed. "Even three years later, you still couldn't figure it out? *I* had it all sorted within my first three months—"

"Can it, Oluo," Petra scowled, slapping his shoulder.

"What?" he protested. "I wasn't joking! It's true!"

"Yeah, I know," she sighed. "But you don't have to rub it in his face!"

"It *is* ironic," Eld said. "The soldiers who never really need to use their ODM are the ones who are the best at it, and those who could be the greatest hand-to-hand combatants might never even have to fight another human being."

"I know, okay?" Moths fluttered around the light over the mess hall's porch. "And, look, I'm not saying it's right, it's just the way things are." Eren sat next to Armin, glaring to the side as the blonde-haired boy talked. "Before Wall Maria fell, ODM experts were rare. Only Scouts risked proximity to Titans, and their regiment was small to begin with. . ."

"It's like what you were talking about," Gunther said.

Moblit nodded. "ODM training got really intense after the Fall," he said. "Before, it was just basic training—enough for people to be able to jump the Wall. Now, though. . ."""

"If you can't take down a fake Titan," Hange said, "it's off to the fields with you."

Eren ignored Armin's words, eyes burning with anger as he listened to Jean talk on the either side of the room. ". . . key is to rev it up before you leap, just for a sec," the ash-aired boy was telling his table. "That's how you conserve fuel, let your momentum work for you."

"You really figured that out while you were only in training?" Petra's eyes widened. "I'm impressed!"

"I didn't get that until I was on my third Expedition," Moblit praised.

"I guess 'number one in ODM' isn't just a title," Eld said.

"Still, that's pretty advanced."

"Duh." Jean grinned, leaning forwards and propping his chin up on his hand. "It's called having a sixth sense for the finer points of your gear."

"That might be true," Sasha said, "but, Jean, I'm starting to agree with Eren—are you *sure* your head would be able to fit in the Interior?"

"Who was the walking stomach who wanted to join the MPs just to have guaranteed meals for life?" Jean shot back.

"Wait, when did Eren say that?" Eld asked.

"I'm pretty sure it'll show you," Petra said.

He glanced at where Mikasa sat across from Eren, ignoring both conversations around her as she ate her soup. "You gotta do the strut if you wanna make the cut." He put his hands back on the table. "The MPs only take the best."

"Oh, poor, poor, Jean," Connie teased as the long-faced boy slowly turned red. "Don't worry, you'll find love one day. Or maybe not," he added with a shit-eating grin.

"Says the guy who's had his head squeezed out of shape!"

Marco watched him, eyes wide, a calm, pleasant expression on his face. "Oh, man, that'd be amazing," he said, looking up at the ceiling with a wide smile. "Working within a stone's throw of the King. No greater honour than that." He raised his mug to his lips.

"I honestly can't believe that you still think that, after three years," Eld said. "Or, uh, *did*."

"You really do believe in the King, huh?" Gunther asked.

"I—yes." Marco nodded. "To me, there's no greater honour than serving the country."

"And why not do that by reclaiming our land?" Mike asked.

"Don't get me wrong," Marco said, "I completely understand what you're doing, and I respect it! It's just—well, I was never the broadest thinker. For me, serving the King always meant joining the MPs, and protecting the people from the inside." He looked up at them, brows furrowed anxiously. "You get it, right?"

"Yeah." Petra nodded. "Don't worry—you don't have to defend yourself, or your opinions."

Annie felt something in her chest twist painfully as Marco smiled, relieved, and turned back to the screen. *You're an idiot, too*.

"Shut up, Marco." Marco spluttered as Jean smacked the back of his head, drenching his face with his drink.

Krista gasped. "Jean!"

"We're not children, you can drop the misty-eyed BS." Marco stared, unnerved, at Jean as he talked, eyes narrowed wickedly, smirking. "Honour doesn't have any damn part of it. You just want a nice, cushy job in the Interior, playing glorified sentry."

"Oh, come on!" Ymir snorted. "Let the dumbass have his own dreams."

"Uh. . . thank you?" Marco said hesitantly.

"Poor Marco," Sasha giggled. "You've got it all over your face?"

"That's not true!" Marco protested. "That's not true at all! Listen to you guys!"

"Interior." Both boys looked over at the single word to where Eren sat, holding his own mug, though he made no moves to lift it to his mouth. "Five years ago, this was part of it."

"Really, Eren?" Sasha groaned. "It was the last week! You couldn't have let it slide *once*?"

"Jean's not the only one who wanted to go into the MPs," Ymir said. "And don't say that he was the only one being obnoxious about it, because he sure as hell wasn't."

"You got a point to make, friend?" Jean demanded as Eren tilted his head back, taking a drink. "I'm right here."

"Poor Jean." Eren put his mug down. "So misguided." He looked up coldly at the other boy. "And, besides, I don't think your big head'll fit into the Interior, anway."

“There it is!” Eld crowed.

Jean’s eye twitched as Reiner and Connie stifled their laughter, succeeding for all but a few giggles, shoulder shaking. “Very funny,” Jean growled as more quiet chuckles rippled through the room.

“Seriously, Eren, you didn’t have to pick a fight *every* time Jean talked about the MPs,” Sasha sighed.

“Of, if only he hadn’t,” Connie sighed wistfully. “Life would have been so peaceful.”

“Hear, hear,” Ymir said.

“Seems a little backwards to me.” Eren glared at him. “Fine-tuning your Titan killing skills so the brass’ll station you somewhere you’ll never see one.”

“You can’t just pass that off as your own opinion!” Jean yelled. “You literally just found out about that that afternoon!”

“You’d rather I was good at getting killed?” Jean retorted. “Thanks, but I’ll pass. Better to play the system than get gnawed on.”

“Yeah, and, apparently, you knew about it already!” Eren countered.

“Not all of us are suicidal,” Jean snapped, tilting his chin up, “or have healing powers to back us up if we get hurt.”

“That’s. . . a fair argument, actually,” Moblit said.

Eren grit his teeth with a furious hiss, leaping to his feet. “You son of a bitch!” he yelled.

“His goddamned *temper*,” Levi groaned, rubbing the bridge of his nose. “I swear to god, if they keep yelling, I’m going to break that fucking window, walk into the other dimension, and hope for the fucking best.”

“Bring it on, you little bastard!” Jean yelled back, jumping up as well.

“Do you have to be so receptive to it?” Krista asked. “I mean, couldn’t you just ignore him?”

“What, and let him keep ranting about Titans and how everyone over the age of three should pick up a sword and march outside the Walls?” Jean rolled his eyes. “Yeah, no.”

“I do *not*—!” Eren began hotly.

“You’re literally proving his point,” Ymir sighed.

“Eren, please stop it!” Armin begged, shoving the bench back as he stood.

“Gentlemen,” Mikasa said loudly, standing up as Eren grabbed Jean’s shirt. “Please.” She stepped between them, grabbing Eren’s hand and pulling it away from Jean.

“Well, at least Mikasa broke it up,” Petra said. “What?” she asked when a couple of cadets stifled giggles.

“You’ll see.” Marco shook his head, clearly exasperated.

Jean stared as she they looked into each other's eyes, as if having a silent argument, and looked down at his hand, which she was still holding onto. Eren lowered his head, looking away, Mikasa having apparently won the argument, and Jean exploded.

"Stop fucking laughing!" Jean demanded, face crimson.

"You're such a dumbass!" Ymir howled.

"Can't deny the truth!" Sasha snorted.

"Don't worry," Connie snickered. "I'm sure Mikasa'll look away from Eren long enough to notice you exist, eventually." Mikasa glanced away, staring determinedly at a spot on the wall, cheeks dusted light pink, while Armin patted her back awkwardly.

"You think you can judge me? Huh?" he yelled, grabbing Eren's shirt and pulling a fist back.

"You rip my shirt, you're dead!" Eren shouted back.

"I don't give a damn about your shirt! You piss me off!" Jean roared.

"Honestly? Same," Ymir nodded.

"I *am* right here, you know."

"What? Are you crazy?" Eren suddenly started, and the world froze, illuminated in shades of red and toxic green.

"Woah, what?" Eld blinked. "What just happened?"

His gaze moved over the cadets, all of whom were watching the exchange, focusing on two in particular: Reiner, staring ahead over the rim of his mug, not looking in their direction, but obviously listening; and Annie, a chin propped in her hand, looking over her shoulder—for once, completely absorbed into the going-ons.

"Did time stop, or something?" Moblit asked.

"That's what it looks like." Hange frowned. "But I don't think so. . . Eren, what happened?"

"I—" Eren shuffled awkwardly. "Had a thought."

"Wow, really?" Ymir asked mockingly. "No wonder the episode stopped—they wanted us to treasure this rare moment."

"Oh, can it," he snapped, flushing.

***Oh, wait*. Eren's eyes were wide.**

Gunther shuddered at the angle, goosebumps popping up over his arms as he stared at the other brunette's wide, buggy eyes, practically protruding from his head. *This angle is creepy as fuck*.

***I get it. He has something to prove. Sounds familiar*. He looked at Jean—his mouth open, frozen mid-shout, and eyes wide, desperate, tears pricking the corners.**

"Wh—I don't look like that!" Jean protested. "And I'm not trying to *prove* anything, you—" He clamped his jaws shut. *I'm not. . . right? I mean, yeah, there's Mikasa, but that's just*

a silly crush. And I'm not *trying to prove I'm better than him—I wouldn't waste my energy*. He barely refrained from shaking his head. *Shit—no, no, I'm fucking not*.

"You. . ?" Connie prompted.

Jean scowled, shoving him away gently with a finger to his forehead. "Piss off."

Two more images flashed onto the screen: one of a much younger, furious Eren, tear tracks on his cheeks bashing the top of Hannes's head with his elbow while the city burned around him; the other, Eren shouting passionately at Armin and Mikasa in the Trost refugee camp.

The tip of Eren's tongue flicked out, wetting his lips at the sight of the, by now, familiar images.

Ymir rolled her eyes. *What a fucking drama queen*. She sneered. *The world's bigger than just you, dumbass—far,* far *bigger*.

***Sorry to do this*. Eren grit his teeth, and time began moving again. He raised his hand, gripping Jean's wrist. *It's only to end this before things get out of hand*. His other hand moved forwards, travelling in slow motion, to shove at Jean's clavicle. Annie's eyes widened with realization as Eren raised his foot, preparing to kick.**

Hange's eyes widened. *He really figured all that out just by having it used on him once?*

Eren's foot shot out, sending Jean's feet flying out from beneath him. Jean landed on the ground with a stunned shout, and the rest of the hall let out a collective "*ooh*" as Eren stumbled before standing up straight.

Not perfect. Mike noted his stumble. *But damn impressive, nonetheless—I don't think* I've *even picked up a move that quick before. Well,* he glanced out of the corner of his eye, *maybe* they *could, but certainly not most people.* He chuckled, shaking his head. *The way these episodes are set up. . . half the time, you're rooting for him, half the time, you're screaming at him, and the rest of the time, you're just laughing your ass off. And, of course*. . . his smile faded slightly. *There's the serious parts, too. Just a harsh reminder that this is real life, and not just a story*.

"Damnit!" Jean sat up, rubbing the back of his head. "What the hell was that move?"

"Little something I picked up this afternoon," Eren glared down at him, "while you were busy with your thumb up your ass." Annie watched the exchange, expression revealing nothing of her inner thoughts. "You honestly believe the Military Police are your ticket to the good life?"

"And the Corps are?" Ymir raised an eyebrow. "Sorry to burst your bubble, Jaeger, but the Scouts don't exactly have the best reputation, or survival rate. The MPs, on the other hand, have got you insured for life, and nearly all of them retire old and gray, with balls of fat for stomachs."

"Why did you join the Corps, then," Petra asked, "if you're so opposed to the ideas?" She wasn't judgemental—curious, rather. *This year's recruits sure are something. They're all*

enigmas—layers upon layers of history. Everyone's got something on their shoulders—I can't figure any of them out.

Ymir shrugged. "I didn't get into the top ten," she said simply as way of explanation.

"Then why not join the Garrison?" Gunther asked. "Sure, their jobs got riskier after Maria and Trost, but, if you got stationed in the North, or East or West, then you would practically have a guaranteed life plan."

Ymir hesitated for less than a second before shrugging again, a casual rise and fall of her shoulders. "What can I say?" she asked. "Who knows—maybe the hype got to me, or something." For a second, Gunther was sure that her eyes had flicked to the right, towards the other girl sharing the beanbag, but the moment was over in less than a heartbeat, and Ymir was looking forwards again.

Jean returned the glare from where he sat on the ground. "You're not a soldier. You're a joke."

"God, Eren," Connie groaned.

Levi rolled his eyes. "Bet he'd have thrown an even bigger hissy fit if someone snapped at him for talking about Titans too much," he grumbled. "But *nooo*, *he* can bitch all he wants."

Erwin chuckled quietly. "His temper is an issue," he agreed. "Has he improved any since joining your squad."

Levi rolled his eyes again. "If you count saluting every time one of us enters the room an improvement, yeah. *I* don't—it's just as annoying."

"Give him some time for the hero worship to fade," Erwin advised, smiling faintly. "I'm sure he'll start acting normally again soon."

"If *this* is his 'normal', then I think I'd rather stick to hero worship, thanks," Levi growled.

A drum beat solemnly as the tension heightened, all eyes fixed on the pair in the middle of the hall. Before anything else could happen though, the door creaked open and Shadis peered in, one visible eye paralyzingly bright against the backdrop of night.

Sasha let out a sudden, horrified gasp. "Oh *no*. . ."

"What?" Connie asked. His expression suddenly brightened. "Oh!"

Moblit stared at them, bewildered. "Uh. . . something the rest of us ought to know?"

"No!" Sasha screeched.

"Yes!" Connie nearly yelled, elated, at the same time.

"You'll see, anyways," Armin said.

"Would someone care to explain the little ruckus I heard just now?" He glared at them with intensity never before seen on a man with no eyebrows.

Petra shuddered. "He hasn't lost his touch," she muttered.

Gunther nodded fervently. "You'd think spending all his time around kids would've softened him up a bit."

"I do hope everything's all right."

The flame in a lantern flared as the two boys slowly returned to their seats, cold sweat drenching their foreheads.

"I don't know what you're making such a big deal about," Oluo said loudly. "From my perspective, it's just Shadis scaring the shit out of a bunch of greenhorns—"

"From your perspective, the world is flat," Petra said, tone flatter than the expression. "Just keep watching."

A silence descended on the hall, broken only once Mikasa raised her hand. "Sasha passed some gas, sir."

Laughter erupted throughout the room, bouncing off the walls. The corner of Levi's lip twitched, and Erwin chuckled as Hange heaved forwards, slapping their knee.

"Fuckin' fantastic!" Ymir cried, throwing her head back, shoulders shaking from laughter.

"Just as good as the first time!" Connie chortled, snickering and pointing at Sasha's face, red with fury and embarrassment.

"I still can't believe Mikasa made a *joke!*" Ymir wheezed.

"I know!" Connie gasped back.

Mikasa frowned. "I'm funny," she said, almost hesitantly.

Annie exhaled through her nose, and Ymir rolled her eyes. "Yeah, sure. Whatever."

Sasha let out a horrified gasp, eyes widening.

"Oh, dear," Petra hid a giggle behind her hand at the dramatic shot.

"Why am I not surprised?" Shadis asked, a fist held up in front of his mouth and nose, while Reiner and Connie shook with the effort of hiding their laughs in front of him.

"He played along?" Eld laughed disbelievingly. "Or did he actually believe it?"

"I honestly don't know," Armin chuckled.

Sasha made another alarmed noise, gaping in injustice. "For the love of god, learn some self-control," Shadis called as he left the room, slamming the door behind him.

"Well," Erwin said, once the laughter had finally died down. "That was certainly. . . something."

"Still don't see why it was such a big deal," Oluo grumbled.

Jean and Eren glared at each other from across the table as Sasha shook Mikasa back and forth, wailing in embarrassment.

"Well, at least it stopped the fight,"

The brunette was finally silenced as the dark-haired girl shoved a piece of bread into her mouth.

Sasha pressed her face into a cushion, even the back of her neck red with mortification. "Why, Mikasa?" she groaned, voice muffled substantially. "Why?"

"*Of the original recruits*. . ." A dramatic drum beat played as a group of cadets trained in the yard—barely a handful, compared to the hundreds that had crowded the place like ants shoved into a hill to small on the first day. "*218 cadets graduated*."

Mike's eyebrows shot into his hairline. "That's a whole lot less than in my day," he said.

Erwin nodded. "It's a lot more rigorous, now," he said. "Especially since the recruits run a real risk of fighting Titans, no matter where they go."

"*Some with honours*. . ." Jean grappled with Nack, teeth grit, before finally overpowering the dark-haired boy and throwing him to the ground with a shout.

"*Honours*." Jean dragged the word out, smirking.

"Yeah, yeah, we get it." Ymir rolled her eyes.

"Nobody's saying you're *bad*," Eren said haughtily. "You just don't have to be so obnoxious about it."

"Look who's talking about being obnoxious," Jean sneered.

"You got something to say to my face, Ponybody?"

"Bring it on, Dickless!"

"Oh, for Rose's sake," Eld groaned as Mikasa and Armin and Connie and Marco wrestled the two warring recruits back into their seats.

"Do you have heart?" Clouds drifted through the inky night sky over the cadets' graduating compound.

"Sir!" the rows of cadets shouted as one, raising their fists into sharp salutes.

"As of this moment," the head instructor announced, standing in front of them, flanked by the other instructors. "You have three options open to you. Choose wisely."

Sasha squealed, pointing at the line of cadets standing in front of the rest. "It's us!"

"*The Garrison Regiment*." In front of a 3D diagram of the three Walls, the crest bearing the roses and spiked thorns spun forwards, hovering in the middle of the screen.

"Woah." Jean blinked at the sudden switch in visuals. "That's definitely something."

"*Whose job is to reinforce the Walls*."

A few Scouts clapped politely.

"*Reinforce the Walls*," Ymir scoffed. "Well, if that's their job, they sure as hell aren't doing it right."

"Hey!" Eren whirled around. "They've gotten better!"

"Yeah, 'cause their reinforcements were *so* effective against the Colossal in Trost—" Bertolt jumped in his seat, flinching nervously.

Eren looked like he wanted to say more, but, after, a warning glare from Levi and cautious touch on the shoulder from Armin, he turned back to the screen, arms crossed grumpily over his chest.

"*The Scout Regiment*." The Garrison crest moved to the side as another coat of arms appeared, blue and white wings spread wide. "*Who ride out into Titan country to take back what was once ours.*"

Cheering erupted throughout the room. Eren jumped onto his seat, banging a spoon against a bowl, roaring at the top of his lungs.

"Fuck yeah!" Eld yelled, pointing at the screen. "That's the shit!"

"*And the Military Police Regiment*." The Survey Corps' symbol moved to the right as the third and final crest flipped forwards, the green unicorn's mane flowing in an imaginary breeze.

Marco and Krista both clapped enthusiastically, doing their best to make up for the silence in the room—it was overwhelmingly quiet, compared to the deafening din from just a second ago. "Go, Annie!" Krista added, pumping her fist into the air enthusiastically.

"Oh, god," Ymir groaned, rolling her eyes.

"*Maintaining law and order under orders from His Royal Majesty*."

Levi's lip curled in disgust. "So, that's how they're selling it, huh?" He bared his teeth in a cold sneer. *Fucking pigs*.

"Those cadets eligible for the MP have already been named," the instructor said, Shadis and the silver-haired man from the first day on either side of him.

"I've got a question," Eren said. "And, *no*, I'm *not* trying to be a dick right now." Ymir mock-gasped, placing her hands on her cheeks, eyes widening. He scowled at her before continuing. "Why is it that the top ten are the only ones eligible for the MPs? Shouldn't it be for the Corps? 'Cause there's a higher chance of them surviving, I mean."

"Honestly?" Mike shrugged. "I don't think it really has anything to do with ability—it's more the fact that everybody wants to join the MPs, and, if they did, then the other regiments wouldn't have anybody."

"Plus," Hange said. "If that *was* the rule, I doubt the Corps would get nearly enough members."

"Yeah," Jean sighed. "Most people have sense."

"The rest of you, take a look." Ten individuals stood out from the rest of the group, lined up in front of the others. "These are the top of your class."

A trumpet fanfare played as the camera zoomed back, the top ten silhouetted dramatically against a bright light, heads up as they looked ahead—both to the stage and to their futures.

Hoots and clapping filled the room. "Great job, you guys!" Eld congratulated.

Connie snickered at the sight of Jean glaring daggers at Eren from the corner of his eye on screen. Jean scowled, slapping the back of the hand. "Knock it off, already," he snapped.

***This is it*. Compared to the small, triumphant smiles and blank boredom on the others, Eren's expression was downright furious as he glared ahead.**

"It's your graduation!" Petra said. "You couldn't have calmed down just a bit, for that?"

"I had one goal," Eren said, lifting his chin defiantly. "And I was another step closer to reaching it. Don't you think that anybody would focus on that, instead?"

"No," Gunther said bluntly. "But, then again, you're not just anybody, are you?"

We've made it. **Armin stood behind them, among the rows of other cadets, smiling as he looked at his friends.**

Even though he's nowhere near his friends' level, he's still smiling for them. Hange cracked a small smile of their own as they watched the scene unfold. *He's a good one. I just hope he sticks around*.

Our time is now. Titans**. . . he lowered his head, eyes blazing in the darkness.** ***Be ready!***

"Drama queen," Ymir grumbled.

"Let him have his moment," Krista chided.

Information Available for Public Disclosure.

Top 10 Members of the Cadet Corps Class, Part 1**.**

The cadets stood in various different positions across the screen, their name and rank written neatly in Japanese over their heads, translated into subtitles below.

"Is *that* how they spell our names?" Sasha stared at the sharp curves and lines over her head—chickenscratch, in her opinion.

"That's so weird." Jean muttered and he moved a finger slowly in front of him, tracing the characters spelling out his name in the air.

Number 10: Krista Lenz

She was a member that I didn't expect. Erwin thought back to the reports he'd pored over on the cadets joining his regiment. *She just barely made it into the top ten, if I remember—a difference of a few points between her and. . .* His gaze slid to the side, landing on the girl next to Ymir. *Her*. His gaze flickered over the two girls: Ymir was all hard edges and tight, lean muscles, compared to the delicate strength behind Krista's soft gentility. *Is there a reason for that, I wonder*?

Number 9: Sasha Braus

Number 8: Connie Springer

He placed above Sasha? Hange raise their eyebrows, surprised. *I would've thought for sure that his. . . well, idiocy, to put it bluntly, would have lowered him a few notches on the written exam. Huh*. They nodded slowly. *Not bad*.

Number 7: Marco Bodt

Number 6: Jean Kirschtein**.**

Top 10 Members of the Cadet Corps Class, Part 2**.**

All five of them came from Wall Maria. Mike's gaze glossed over the cadets—first, on screen, and then drifting over to their real-life counterparts. *Guess the saying's true*, he thought with a small grimace. *What doesn't kill you makes you stronger*. He pursed his lips. *But at what cost?*

Number 5: Eren Jaeger

Number 4: Annie Leonhart

Number 3: Bertolt Hoover

Number 2: Reiner Braun

Number 1: Mikasa Ackerman

"Of course Mikasa's number one!" Connie grinned.

"Honestly, if she'd scored anything less than full marks," Sasha said, "I probably would've shat myself."

Streetlamps illuminated the dark streets of Trost, their soft, golden glows spread across the walls, lighting up the bases of towers and sidewalks. "All right!" Inside the Cadets Compound, the freshly-graduated soldiers cheered, laughed, and talked, clinking mugs and eating, for the first time in three years, without any worries hovering over their shoulders.

Jean half-smiled, half-grimaced sadly, thinking back to how he'd sat, hunched-over, all night. *Why, oh, why, couldn't I have just loosened up for one night?* His nails dug into his palm, and he glanced over at Marco guiltily. *For all I know, it could've been my last chance, ever*.

Connie and Sasha raised their mugs, toasting each other. "MP, here I come!" Connie declared.

"Three square meals a day for life!" Sasha gushed.

"Ah." Sasha sighed. *I'd forgotten about that*. She took a morose bite out of her sandwich. *Still, I don't regret it. Yet*. She frowned. *If we're seeing the future*. . . A chill ran up her spine as a sudden thought hit her. *The Expedition. . . it's only weeks away*. Her frown deepened as she lowered the sandwich. *Which means we might see*. . . She gulped. *I can hardly handle the thought of watching everyone die a second time!* She glanced around uneasily, taking in the faces around her. *What if one of* us *is the next to fall?*

Connie frowned as she placed the half-eaten sandwich back on her plate. "Are you okay?" he asked. "I've. . . *literally* never seen you turn down free food before."

"Huh?" She looked at him. "Oh, uh. . ." She chuckled uneasily. "Heh," she scratched her cheek, grinning awkwardly. "Guess even I have a limit, huh?"

He frowned, but didn't press the matter any more, turning back to the screen.

"How in god's name did I get ranked under Eren?" Jean sat alone at a table under the stairs, back hunched over his mug as he glared over his shoulder, plate of potatoes abandoned. "Shit!" He raised his mug, taking an angry gulp.

"Well, he *is* a Titan Shifter," Petra pointed out. "That's gotta give him something of an advantage." Jean perked up slightly, some of his old smirk appearing back on his face.

"But he was only number five," Eld pointed out. "There's four more people above him, and I doubt *they're* Titans." Jean scowled again, and Annie's left eye twitched subtly from beneath her curtain of hair as Eren snickered. Erwin's gaze quickly swept over the four above Eren before returning to the screen.

"You're really going to turn your backs on the MPs for the Scouts?" Thomas stared at Eren, eyes wide.

"Why in the world would you do that?" Samuel asked. "You're in the top ten."

"You really didn't waver a bit, huh?" Gunther shook his head. *Part of me admires that, and the other half. . . well, I've gotta agree with Shadis on this count. He sure can be fucking terrifying*.

"The Scouts have always been my goal." Eren stared at a distant point as he spoke, the others listening in a mix of awe and shock. "I don't want the easy life." He looked up. "Not with all the work I've put in."

"I don't get it," Connie said frowning. "Sorry, dude, but. . . I mean, isn't that the whole point? You work hard for long enough that you get to just. . . I don't know. Kinda dick off and retire?"

"What, at fifteen?" Jean snorted. "You might be bald, but you're not that old, yet."

"Though," Oluo grumbled, "becoming an MP officer *is* practically the same thing as retirement, with how little they actually do—"

"While I actually agree with you this time," Petra sighed, grabbing his hair and tilting his head back, "could you *not* bite your tongue every half second? And, plus, remember," she added in an undertone, "one of the recruits *is* an MP. Maybe be a little nicer?"

Thomas's eyes were larger than wagon wheels as Eren met his eyes. "I trained to fight Titans."

Hange tilted their head, peering into the background. "Those two. . ." they said. "The redhead and that big, bald guy. Are they a couple?"

"Oh, yeah." Eren nodded.

"Definitely," Ymir confirmed.

"Without a doubt," Jean said.

"They're always so lovey-dovey," Sasha said. "It was funny at first, but now it's just annoying. Well," she furrowed her brow, "they *were* lovey-dovey. . ."

A heavy silence fell on the room. "Hey, Omni?" Armin said suddenly.

All heads turned to the blue-haired, minimum wage worker. She looked up, slightly surprised at being addressed after so long (In all honesty, she'd been enjoying the peace and quiet—but the job comes first). "What?"

"You said that. . . *dead* characters go to other universes once their timelines are up, right?" Eren said, measuring the word carefully on his tongue. "So, are Franz and Hannah. . ?"

"Oh, yeah," Omni said, "they're fine. We got them set up Universe H2015LM—18th century British colonies. A happy little couple, with a guaranteed life insurance policy. God, they are *not* ready for the revolution," she added in a mutter under her breath.

"Revolution?" Eren frowned.

"Nothing," Omni said quickly. "But they're fine, for now."

Krista smiled. "That's good." She glanced down at her hands. *I wonder*. . . she thought. *Is* she *in another world right now? Because. . . she feels so* near. She suddenly grimaced, temples throbbing as an image of dark hair and brilliant blue eyes flashed through her mind.

Ymir turned to her with a small frown. "Hey, what's wrong?"

"Nothing," Krista said, her expert lying faltering slightly. Ymir frowned, but, after a firm look from Krista, turned back to the TV. Krista, herself, took a deep breath, calming herself. *What was that about?* she wondered, drawing her brows together as she fought to remember what she'd been thinking about. *A. . . woman?* She shook her head. *Whatever. If you didn't remember, then it's not important*.

"Are you insane?" Thomas demanded.

Silence fell in the hall at Thomas's shout. The chatter died out, faster than a less-than-capable Scout on his first mission, and the other cadets turned, all their eyes fixed on the small group in the back.

Petra winced. "Yikes."

"Uh—" Thomas looked around, cheeks heating up upon realizing the amount offaces turned their directions. "How many have died?" he asked. Samuel shifted his weight awkwardly as Thomas kept talking. "We're talking a fifth of the population!"

"Gotta admire his courage, talking in front of all those people like that," Eld said.

Moblit nodded. "He went from having a one-on-one conversation to suddenly giving a speech he was, in no way, prepared for," he agreed. "He even managed to make some good points."

"*Good* points?" Eren whirled around, frowning. "Are you even *listening* to what he's—"

"I believe we already had a conversation about showing officers respect?" Erwin said mildly.

"Oh, I—!" Eren shook his head quickly. "I wasn't trying to be *rude*, sir." He quickly saluted, as if to prove a point. "It's just, well, Thomas—"

"Just because you don't agree with him, doesn't mean he's wrong," Mike said. *Walls know he's actually* right*,* he thought with a small sigh.

Jean's cheek was propped in his hand as he listened, feigning indifference. "If that doesn't paint a picture for you, I don't know what will." Sasha and Connie had abandoned

their own conversation, brows furrow, expressions hesitant as they watched. "This is our life now. We can't beat them."

We couldn't. Hange glanced at Eren from the corner of their eye, a small smile tugging at their lips. *Now, we've got an actual fighting chance*.

A morose tune began playing, a somber cloud casting a shadow over the hall. Those who had been revelling with their friends and comrades mere seconds ago had their heads down, faces thrown into shadow as they went over Thomas's words in their head. Thomas lowered his own head, looking uneasy, and Samuel sighed, looking down.

"Way to kill the mood," Oluo muttered quietly in the tense silence that matched the one on screen. He grimaced as he received sharp elbows in the ribs from both sides.

"Yeah? So what?" They looked up at the quiet words, echoing like a gunshot in the silent hall. "We buckle?" Eren's voice rose as he tilted his chin up, eyes dark with the familiar determination. "Take it all lying down?"

"Kid really doesn't give up," Mike muttered.

No. Mikasa looked down. *He doesn't*.

"Bu—" Thomas stuttered, looking down again.

"Things have changed." Eren clenched his fist, voice shaky, but body steady. "Maybe not a hell of a lot, but enough. They aren't the mystery that they were five years ago."

Actually, Hange nearly pointed out. *There's still plenty we didn't, and still don't, know. It wasn't until recently that we actually started making progress*. They kept their mouth shut though, content to sit and listen.

Mikasa and Armin watched as Eren continued his speech. "There's still a long way to go, but we've made progress." Bertolt's eyes were wide, Reiner's brows furrowed. "Every battle we lost taught us a lesson, gave us the tiniest inroad toward something like hope."

He doesn't know shit about what he's talking about, Levi thought. *He's never seen battle*—real *battle before. But, hell, if he doesn't sound convincing*. He was almost impressed.

Annie watched over the edge of her cup, out of the corner of her eyes, head bent low. "You telling me it's better to cut our losses? Let all the death and destruction be meaningless?" His voice rose into a shout. "Just to ball up and accept it? Not on your life!"

"Damn, Eren," Eld said. "Judging from your attitude, I never would've guessed you could come up with this kind of stuff on the spot."

"It's not really on the spot," Ymir drawled. "More of a rephrase of the same shit he's been sprouting for the past few years."

"Still," Gunther said, "it's impressive."

"Oh, just you wait," Connie sighed. "There's more."

Eren clenched his fist and held it up in front of him, tears of anger and passion pricking the corners of his eyes. "Humanity's future lies outside the Walls," he said, "and I'm going to clear the way!"

"You might want to work on some basic skills before that," Levi grumbled. "You can't 'clear' anything if you can't even fly around without being overdramatic." Eren's cheeks flushed with embarrassment as Gunther choked back a snicker and Mikasa glared at the Captain.

His eyes were bright with unshed tears and fury, brows drawn so close in a glare that he had nearly formed a unibrow. "I'm going to take back what was ours! I'll drive them out. And as long as one of us can say that, we're not done."

He certainly is passionate, Erwin thought. *Maybe a bit too much*. He frowned, trying to remember a time where Eren had given a speech without bursting into tears. *I admire his tenacity, but it wouldn't do if we lost our greatest boon on his first mission because he's all talk*. He sighed quietly and shook his head before turning back to the TV. *I'm curious to see what we'll be shown of Trost—just how well does Eren Jaeger fare against Titans as a human being?*

Silence fell as Eren finished speaking, everybody staring at him. Eren blinked, seeming to have just fully realized what he had done, and he grit his teeth, turning and running from the room.

"What's the point of giving a speech if you're just going to run away every time?" Oluo scoffed. "You might as well not have said anything—"

"That doesn't even make any sense," Petra snapped.

"Yeah, well. . . well, he's—!"

"He's *fifteen*," Petra said, rolling her eyes. "Just lay off, would you?"

"Uh—" Armin started, and he and Mikasa ran after him. "Eren, wait!"

Jean glared after them as the hall's heavy doors slammed shut. *Yeah, good luck out there, hotshot. I'll root for you from His Majesty's barracks*.

"Ouch," Hange muttered. "That's cold."

Eren sat on the steps outside, rubbing furiously at his eyes with a fist. He turned as Mikasa, tossing the end of her scarf over her shoulder, and Armin approached, red eyes wide as they stood behind him.

Mike sighed. *I understand he's got a past,* he thought, *but he really isn't dealing with it half as well as he should be*. He glanced at the other recruits that hailed from Wall Maria. *He's overemotional*. He pursed. *A real problem on the battlefield. He needs to calm down and get his own feeling under control*.

"That was, uh. . ." The three sat on the steps, less tense and more relaxed, chatting. "Quite a speech you gave back there."

"Yeah." Eren smiled easily at Armin. "Most of it was yours. All the stuff you used to say back in the day."

Heads swivelled from all over the room to look at Armin.

"Really?" Jean suddenly remembered the first episode. "Wait—!" He held his hands up, squeezing his eyes shut as he tried to remember. "In the first episode—you were talking about humanity's future outside, right?"

"Huh." Ymir looked Armin up and down. "So we've got him to blame for Eren's prickishness?"

"Looks like it," Sasha said.

"We are right here, you know," Eren said drily. Next to him, Armin looked ready for the floor to open up and swallow him whole."

Armin turned forwards, lips trembling, as if steeling himself for something. "Yeah, well. . ." He looked up, setting his jaw. "I'm joining the Scout Regiment, too!"

I never would have expected Armin to have planted the seeds of revolution in Eren's head, Eld thought. *So I guess it does make sense that he'd join the Corps too. Still,* he frowned, *he's not exactly the most physically fit; he's got a great boost from adrenaline, sure, but that's about it. I can't help but feel something's gonna happen to him outside the Walls.*

Eren started. "Now you're just being stupid," he said, near desperately. "Come on! You're not a fighter! Your life is with books!"

"Just let him join wherever he wants," Ymir said. "It's not like you control him."

Moblit frowned, crossing his arms. *I can't help but agree with both of them*, he thought. *Armin's definitely an academic genius—but you can't be a Scout and not leave the Walls. The brass would lose their minds*. He ran a hand through his hair with a sigh. Why was life so difficult?

Armin's eyes were just as bright as Eren's as he turned away. "I'm through with letting other people fight for me," he said.

He's got pride, Erwin thought, remembering the younger Armin behaving similarly when Eren and Mikasa had saved him from the bullies. *How much, though? And just how much is too much?*

Eren stared at him, eyes wide. "Guess it's the Scouts for me, too," Mikasa said.

Figures she would've joined for him, too, Oluo thought. *The way she acts around him*. . . he frowned slightly. *It's almost unsettling. Even when he's being an ass, she acts like an obedient puppy*.

Eren gasped, turning around. "Oh, come on!" he protested. "You were top of our class! You'd be wasting your shot!"

"Now you're just being hypocritical," Jean said. "You spent all your time talking about how the strong are meant to be fighting the Titans, but you're not letting the strongest of the year join the Scouts?"

"That's different!" Eren protested. "There's no point in her joining if it's just for me."

That's just the thing, though. Mikasa lowered her head as the others argued. *There's no point in me doing* anything*, without you*. She furrowed her brow, picking at her nails.

“Understand this, Eren,” Mikasa said, voice completely serious, not a trace of teasing in her tone. “Where you go, I go.” Mikasa’s eyes were distant, lost in her thoughts. “I made a promise to your mother before she died. I’m not letting you die.”

“You don’t *have* to, Mikasa,” Eren said. “Mom—” He snapped his jaw shut, licking his lips awkwardly. “She—she told me to keep you alive, too,” he told her. “How am I supposed to be doing that if you get killed for me?”

“I wouldn’t get killed,” Mikasa said quietly. “I’m strong. Stronger than you. *I* can protect *you*.”

“You’re not supposed to, though,” Eren said, voice rising. “I’m a *Titan Shifter! I’m* supposed to be keeping you safe.”

“But when has that ever worked?” she asked bluntly. He blinked, thrown off track. “Eren,” she said quietly, a million words and phrases hidden in the two unassuming syllables.

A gentle, melancholy melody began playing as she tilted her head, looking at Eren. “I’ve got your back whether you like it or not. So just deal with it.”

But he didn’t. Mikasa pursed her lips, scratching at the palm of her hand. *And I didn’t*. She bit her lips the memories of the Battle of Trost surging up in her mind again. She grimaced, touching her forehead as a throb suddenly ripped through her skull.

Armin frowned at her. “Are you okay, Mikasa?” he asked.

“Fine,” she nearly whispered. “Just thinking.”

Eren turned away, looking embarrassed. “Yeah, well, Mom’s not here,” he muttered, rubbing the top of his head.

I doubt she’d take that argument—not now, or ever, Levi thought. *Promises to dead men have a thousand times the weight of ones to living ones.*

“A lot of people I used to care about aren’t here, either.” Eren’s eyes widened. Mikasa looked down at her knees, mouth hidden in her scarf, hair hanging over her eyes.

Jean frowned at the look shared between the two; however, this time, he held only curiousity, without a touch of jealousy. *We never found out*, he thought, why *Mikasa lived with the Jaegers. I mean, they’re obviously not related*. He tilted his head in contemplation. *I mean, she could be adopted, but why?* His frown deepened as he dove deeper into his theories. *The way they acted when it was brought up. . . it seems like a touchy subject. Or a significant one, at least*. He furrowed his brow, turning to look at the dark-haired girl next to Eren. *We know almost everything about each other. . . well, most of us, at least. But she. . . well, she hasn’t really said* anything *about her past, has she? Why?*

Eren looked away and leaned back, turning his face up to the sky. Armin and Mikasa followed his gaze, looking up at the neverending night sky. A single shooting star flew by, there for just a moment before fizzling away, the rest of the stars twinkling above fading away as darkness overtook the scene.

This world’s a shithole, Mike thought, *but, goddamn, if it isn’t beautiful, too*.

Horse hooves echoed through the streets of Trost, mixed in with the murmurs and cheers of thousands of people. "Heads up!" a man shouted. "The main unit of the Scout Regiment is back!"

Petra gasped. "It's us!" she exclaimed.

"Do you think we're going to get introduced?" Oluo asked, excited.

"That's right, Commander Erwin!" Erwin's back was straight, looking straight ahead—a vast contrast to the hunched-over, exhausted-looking man from five years ago.

"Go, Commander!" Connie shouted as the Scouts clapped and cheered enthusiastically. Mike grinned, slapping him on the back, and Hange patted his knee happily. Erwin smiled faintly, keeping his eyes fixed on the screen.

"Did you give those ugly bastards a thrashing?" a man shouted.

Not quite, Levi thought grimly.

Eren, Armin, and Mikasa stood in the crowd, watching with awe as the Scouts rode by. "Look!" a brown-haired man suddenly exclaimed, pointing in his excitement. "It's Captain Levi!" Eren and Armin's heads whipped around, necks straining to catch a glimpse of the famed soldier.

The entirety of the Special Operations Squad leapt to their feet, hollering and clapping their hands together with such force that, before long, their palms were red. "That's our Captain!" Oluo shouted, punching the air enthusiastically.

"Idiots," Levi muttered, wrinkling his nose as he took a bite of an apple slice.

"You love it," Hange teased.

"Shut up."

"They say he's like an entire brigade unto himself!" The dark-haired man rode behind Mike and Hange, looking to the side, evidently bored out of his mind.

That's gotta *be an exaggeration*, Connie thought. *I mean, yeah, he's strong, but even Mikasa still has to fight with other people*.

"Tch," he muttered, avoiding the gazes of the crowds of people lined up on the sidewalks. "Shut up already."

"Wow," Ymir muttered. *He sure is prickly*.

"Feel how excited everyone is?" Eren asked, eyes following the Scouts as they continued down the street. "It's like the crowd just has a different energy, now."

"That's true," Armin said, nodding. "Public opinion of the Corps rose substantially after Wall Maria fell. It's still nowhere near the level of respect the MPs get, but it's way better."

"Well," Hannah pointed out. "We are going on five years without incident. Seems like a good omen."

Bertolt's fiddled with a loose thread on his jacket. *If only*.

“And you should check out all the cannon upgrades,” Franz added. “The sight alone oughta be enough to scare ‘em off.”

Wishful thinking. Reiner wetted his lips.

“That’s the truth.” Hannah beamed up at him.

“You in denial ‘cause you’re a couple?” Eren asked, eyes wide and face shadowed with horror. “What’s that about?” Armin laughed, holding up two placating hands.

Krista watched the scene sadly. *Watching this right now, there’s no way anybody would’ve guessed that their lives were about to fall apart at the seams*. She looked down at her hands, mouth tight. *Nobody plans for the world to end*.

“Whoa, whoa, whoa!” Hannah turned away, waving a hand frantically at Eren while Franz stared at them, cheeks bright pink. “This isn’t what it looks like! Okay?”

“Knock it off, man!” Franz protested, holding an arm up in front of his face. “It’s embarrassing!”

They could’ve had a life, Moblit thought sadly. *They all could have*. He looked down into his lap. *Sure, they’re living safely in other universes right now, but it’s just not the same*. He sighed. *Nobody should have to live out the remainder of their days in a world that’s not really their own.*

Eren’s entire body shook, col sweat drenching him as he stared at them, Armin laughing quietly next to him. “Hey, hey, lookie here!”

Sasha’s eyes widened. “Hey, isn’t that—” she glanced at Eren. “The, uh, Garrison guy?”

“Hannes.” Eren nodded. “Yeah.”

Eren and Armin turned at the familiar voice. “Mr. Hannes!” Eren exclaimed.

“Word on the street’s they let you graduate yesterday.” Hannes grinned down at the three teens as he walked up to them, a younger, dark-haired soldier following him. “Either you’ve grown up, or standards have plummeted.”

“He looks a lot better,” Mike commented, looking over the other soldier: his beer belly was completely gone, and there wasn’t even a hint of pink in his cheeks. Compared to the droopy-eyed drunkard they’d seen in the first episodes, this man was practically a young buck, fresh off the training field.

Eren nodded. “Yeah,” he said. “He really buckled down after. . .” he hesitated before continuing, “after Maria. He’s even the Engineering Corps’ new Captain,” he added, grinning proudly.

“Oh, yeah, like you’re one to talk,” Eren smirked. “The Corps of Engineers keeping their new chief in the drink?”

“Watch it,” Hannes snickered, poking him sharply in the forehead. Armin and Eren laughed, Mikasa and Hannes’s partner cracking small smiles.

Eren smiled sadly, thinking back to that day—the day his new life had been flipped completely upside down. *It was almost like old times again*.

“I’m sorry if this is out of the blue,” Hannes said, his jovial expression fading. “But I want you to know your mother’s death still haunts me.”

I know it’s going to haunt me, too, Krista thought, tightening her grip on her glass of juice. *She lied and gave up her own life just to save them*. . . She took a quick gulp of her drink, wiping the thoughts from her mind.

Eren blinked, surprised that the older man had brought it up, but he recovered quickly. “Me too,” he said. “But it wasn’t your fault.” Hannes’s eyes widened.

Jean’s eyes widened by a fraction of an inch. “That was. . . unexpected,” he said.

“What?” Eren frowned. “I know I can be an ass, but I’m not completely unreasonable. He saved our lives, and he watched her die, too.”

Mikasa smiled faintly as the others made exaggerated noises of shock. “That was surprisingly mature of you,” Sasha said.

“We were shooting in the dark back then,” Eren said. “But nothing like that’s going to happen again.” His shoulders tensed as he spoke. “We know what we’re dealing with now.”

Armin and Mikasa watched as Eren ran down the street, headed towards his post on the Wall. Hannes stood a ways behind them, his partner nearby. *Fired-up and capable make a good combination, kid*, he thought. He bit his lips, lowering his head slightly. *Don’t screw it up by dying*.

Mikasa flinched at the thought, and Eren grimaced. *And I couldn’t even do that*.

“What?” The fresh graduates stood on top of the walls, cleaning out the barrels of the cannons. Eren’s eyes were wide, his task abandoned as he stared in shock. “What do you mean you’re joining the Scouts?!” Connie ignored him as he wiped down the cannon’s base. “What happened to the MPs? That was your whole thing!”

“That’s so iconic,” Sasha chuckled. “Eren gives a huge speech, and, suddenly, everyone’s on his side.”

“Shut up!” Connie flushed. “I just had a lot of new thoughts, okay?”

“Wow, seriously?” Jean gasped. “I didn’t even know you had *any* thoughts.”

“Yeah, well. . . you’re a horse!” Connie retorted.

“Don’t worry about it!” Connie snapped. “A guy’s allowed to change his mind, okay?”

“I think your speech yesterday lit a fire under him,” Mina told him.

“Huh?” Eren stared at her.

“I do wonder, though, Eren,” Eld said. “Do you normally just open your mouth and start talking, or do you actually plan things out?”

“He doesn’t plan anything,” Jean scoffed. “He just keeps making the same two points out of his ass.”

“Ain’t nobody talking to you!” Connie turned around, cheeks flushed with embarrassment. “His temper tantrum had nothing to do with it.”

“You sure about that?” Ymir snickered.

“Oh, yeah?” Connie scowled. “Why’d *you* join, then?”

“I’m not explaining that shit again,” Ymir snapped. “But it sure as hell ain’t because Eren threw a hissy fit.”

“Take it easy,” Thomas said, joining the circle. “It’s not like you’re the only one.” He scratched his cheek, smiling bashfully.

Gunther opened his mouth, ready to ask about the whereabouts of the other boy, before snapping his jaws shut again. *Shit. Right*. He looked down awkwardly, fiddling with a peanut.

The poor kids, Petra thought sadly.

“Wasn’t he the one trying to talk Eren into the MPs last night?” Moblit asked.

Hange whistled when Armin nodded silently. “Impressive,” they muttered. “You know,” they added in an attempt to lighten the mood, “maybe we should just have Eren make the recruitment speeches from now on. What do you say, Erwin? Huh?”

Erwin chuckled. “I wouldn’t be opposed,” he said.

“What?” Eren looked around at the group. “Are you serious?”

“Can you keep a secret?” They turned around as Sasha crept up to them, hunched over, holding onto something inside her jacket.

Jean raised an eyebrow. “What are you up to?” he asked her.

She giggled. “You’ll see.”

“‘Cause I totally just helped myself to the Officer’s Pantry!” She grinned, cheeks flushed, and opened a jacket to reveal a large bundle of meat tucked under her arm.

“*Wha?!*” The other cadets shouted together, staring in shock and terror.

The expressions on the faces of the soldiers in the room were nearly identical to the ones on screen.

“Holy shit!” Ymir wheezed.

“How did you not get caught?” Jean demanded.

“Just ‘cause you’re shitty at stealing meat,” Sasha said, crossing her arms smugly, “doesn’t mean we all are.”

“Once! That happened *once!*”

“This class,” Mike shook his head. “I swear. . .”

“Sasha!” Eren cried. “They can throw your butt in the clink for that!”

“It’ll be fine.” Sasha looked far too gone to even remotely care about the consequences: mouth hanging open and drool running down her chin, eyes glazed over, and her cheeks flushed with red.

“It will *not* be fine,” Levi grumbled.

Mike grinned cheekily at him, raising an eyebrow. “Pot calling the kettle black.

Levi scowled. “Low blow, Sniffy,” he growled.

“I’m willing to share. Oh, can you imagine the sandwiches?” She let out a low, shuddering laugh, shoulders shaking.

“Good lord.” Eld stared, horrified. “She’s insane.”

“Nah,” Gunther chuckled. “I think she’s just hungry.”

“With her, they’re the same thing!”

“Put it back!” Eren shouted.

“Yeah!” Mina frowned. “Do you have any idea how rare meat’s been since the Titans took Wall Maria?”

“Um, a little bit,” Sasha said airily. “Yeah.”

Sasha flushed as the others shot her accusatory looks. “Okay, okay!” She held her hands up in surrender. “I get it! I shouldn’t have done it!”

“No, you shouldn’t have,” Erwin agreed. “As long as you learned from it.”

Jean snorted as Sasha nodded fervently. “Doubt it.”

She walked forwards, kneeling next to a crate. “Just think about it this way,” she said, lifting the lid. “Pretty soon,” she put the meat in the box, “we’ll take back all the room we need for livestock.”

I really hope so, Armin thought, pursing his lips.

Samuel grit his teeth, an intense look of conflict on his face. Finally, he tilted his head back, taking a deep breath. “I would really like a slice, please!” he shouted, screwing his eyes shut tightly.

“Oh, jeez,” Hange chuckled.

“Hey!” Connie broke in, Thomas still staring at Samuel in shock. “If he gets one, so do I! Just so you know.”

Eren’s jaw dropped. “Me too!” Mina said, grinning mischievously. “I’m in on it, too!”

“But. . .” The camera closed in on Eren as he stared at what he surely perceived as chaos, eyes wide.

“Since when did Eren care about rules?” Petra giggled.

“That’s different!” Eren said. “This is *stealing!* We’re supposed to be manning the Wall, not fooling around over meat.”

“What a suck-up,” Oluo scoffed, tilting his chin up.

“That’s rich, coming from you,” Eld drawled.

“Come on!” Samuel said. “Don’t just stand there. If they see us slacking off, we’re in for it.” He grinned at them before resuming his cleaning of the barrel.

Eren sighed. *If only that was our only concern*.

“See you guys at lunchtime.” Mina waved over her shoulder as she walked back to her cannon.

Eren looked around, then smiled, tilting his head up slightly, letting the sun stream down on him. He clenched his fist and looked back down at the city below. *Has it really been five years?* he wondered, staring at the countless red-tiled roofs and towers laid out like a puzzle before him.

"It doesn't really feel like it, does it?" Eren said. "I mean, it felt like it's been forever, but, at the same time, it all went by in a flash."

Armin nodded. "We've been working for years," he said, "and barely noticed the days flying by."

***Look at us*. He looked down at the fortifications surrounding the Gate. *Ready to stand tall again*. The sun streamed down on the rows upon rows of cannons aimed outwards towards the lands within Wall Maria. *We can do it*.**

Sasha froze. "It's about to happen," she whipered.

"Damnit, Eren," Jean muttered. "You jinxed it."

A breeze blew by, ruffling his hair and blowing dead leaves over the wall as Eren stood there, looking over Trost. *Mankind didn't start this fight, but we're going to finish it!*

I can't watch this. But Petra couldn't tear her eyes away.

The music cut off abruptly as a flash of golden lightning struck behind Eren, so bright that even the sunny sky was thrown into darkness.

Krista covered her mouth, stiffening. *They were right there*. Her eyes were wide as she stared at her friends. *They were there—barely a few feet away from the Colossal. They could have died*. Her heart began pounding faster. *Some of them* did *die.* She inhaled sharply. *It could have thrown them all off, if it wanted too.*

Steam erupted over the edge of the Wall as the dead-eyed face of the Colossal Titan rose over the Gate, staring down it's beak-like nose at the soldiers on top.

It's too convenient. Eld frowned as a thought suddenly hit him. *What are the chances that the Colossal just happened to attack, just an hour or so after the Scouts left, while the only ones guarding the Wall were the fresh graduates?* He shook his head. *Am I reading too much into this?* he wondered. *Or is there really something else going on here?*

A horrified silence fell as the cadets stared up at the Titan, frozen where they stood, their hair and clothes still flapping in the wind.

Eren was the first to react, stumbling back with a shocked gasp. A burst of steam and dust exploded through the air as the Gate was blown apart, the fortifications torn away by the force of the wind and flying stones.

Jean clenched his fists, nails cutting into his skin. *I think I know how Eren feels*. Watching as your hometown, streets you'd grown up running down, a Gate that had been a constant for as long as you've lived, *everything*, got torn apart, ripped away by a gale of heat and debris. . . it was enough to shake him down to the core.

The soldiers shouted as they were blown over the edge, falling through the air and tossed about like paper dolls.

Mikasa inhaled sharply, stiffening in her seat.

"Shit!"

Eren yelled as he tumbled through the air, fumbling for his handles. "It's hot!" he yelled, steam still peeling away from his skin as he managed to fire two anchors, burying them in the stone of the Wall.

That would make fighting it difficult, Hange thought, pensive. *Even if you did reach the nape, the steam would probably kill you*. Their frown deepened. *Would it be worth it, though?*

Connie bent his knees, letting the impact roll over him as he skid down the side of the Wall, leather of his soles screeching, dust flying up around him. He suddenly gasped and looked down to see another figure falling through the air.

"Samuel!" The dark-haired boy's eyes were closed, limbs flailing lifelessly and drops of blood trailing in the air above him from a gash on his forehead.

"Oh, god," Gunther breathed. *He's out cold*.

"Did he. . ?" Petra asked.

Connie shook his head. "Sasha saved him," he said.

"Sasha?" Those who hadn't been present during the attack turned to look at the brunette.

"I—well, you'll see," she said awkwardly, pointing at the screen.

Above him, an anchor retracted, tearing away from the Wall. "Sasha!" Mina screamed as Sasha turned and *ran* down the vertical face of the Wall, boots flying across the flat surface.

"Holy *shit!*" Oluo yelled.

"Are you insane?" Moblit cried.

She ignored the shout, continuing to charge downward. She leapt, flipping in the air and landing against the Wall again, accelerating to breakneck speeds as she finally jumped, firing out an anchor.

No, Erwin realized. *She knows exactly what she's doing*. The running, the flip. . . *She had known that she wouldn't have caught up to him just by falling, and, when she felt herself beginning to slip, she somersaulted to stay on the Wall*. He glanced at the brunette from the corner of his eye. *I think Shadis's evaluation is spot-on: her instincts could very well save her life one day*.

Another burst of blood spurted through the air as one of Sasha's anchors buried itself into Samuel's calf, catching him mere seconds before he hit the ground.

Krista jumped, and Ymir grabbed her wrist, startled. "Well, shit," she muttered. "I was *not* expecting that."

The other one was barely holding the both of them up, embedded in the stone above. "Try not to move!" Sasha yelled, standing sideways on the Wall, feet planted far apart and holding tightly onto her anchors. "Understand?!"

Petra turned to Sasha, eyes wide. "You're a hero, you know that?" she said. "You saved his life."

"I—" she flushed, looking own. "I didn't really—he can barely even stand on his leg anymore—"

"It was either that or have him as a red blotch on the ground," Jean told her.

"You did better than the rest of us," Connie reassured her. "You were the only one who actually jumped into action when he fell."

"How did you get him down?" Gunther asked. He couldn't see any way that Sasha would be able to move and not drop the injured boy.

"Team effort," Eren said. "Also, the Garrison helped."

"That was too damn close," Eren breathed shakily. His eyes widened and he gasped, looking down.

Thomas and Connie wore identical expressions of horror as stared at the destruction below them. "Oh, god, no." Smoke rose from the freshly decimated hole in the Gate, cracks spreading out across the rest of the Wall, the gatehouse reduced to chunks of rubble. The stone within was charred from the heat of the Colossal's foot and the force of being kicked apart. "Not again!"

"It's just like Shinganshina," Armin whispered. *The fortifications didn't work at all! The Colossal Titan—he just* appeared— His eyes widened. *Appeared?*

***They're going to get in*. The rubble from the kick had flown all the way down the street, crashing through roofs and walls, cratered into the cobblestone streets. *They're going to get in*. A layer of dust covered everything, turning the houses that, just a minute ago, had been part of a picturesque picture into broken-down structures out of the slums and ruin. *They're going to get in!* Eren's eyes were wide with horror as he stared down at the destruction.**

It's like the world turned into Hell, Gunther thought. When they'd arrived, Titans had already flooded the burning city, the streets running red with blood and the buildings crushed beneath massive feet. Gunther was a soldier, and he'd fought more than his fair share of battles—the carnage of a battlefield was nothing new to him. But this empty stillness, heavy with the anticipation of coming horror, was something he'd never had the misfortune of seeing before—and it was even worse.

Images of Carla being lifted from the rubble of his old home and deposited in the Smiling Titan's mouth flashed through his mind.

We're never going to let anyone go through that hell again, Mike vowed. *I'll swear it on my life*.

No*. A younger Eren slammed his hands down on the side of the boat, angry tears rolling down his cheeks and dripping from his chin. *This is over. I'm going to put a stop to this!

His eyes were wide and twitching as he stared down at the decimated Gate. "I will," he whispered. "This ends now." He grit his teeth.

But it doesn't, Marco's right arm suddenly jerked, grabbing onto the left side of his torso.

Jean glanced at him. "What?" he asked.

"The Battle," Marco said quietly. "It's starting."

"This is it, people!" The other cadets, still on edge, snapped their heads up, shocked by the sudden yell. "Do or die!" Eren yanked his swords out, sparks flying as he dropped away from the Wall, shooting an anchor up to the top of the Gate. "Mounted Cannon Squad Four, take out the Colossal Titan!"

He was quick to react, Hange thought. *Is it all because of his desire for revenge, or does he really just recover that quickly?* They thought back to the Fall of Shinganshina, and how fast after his mother's death the boy had been to lash out at Hannes. *Or maybe he's just always been like that*.

The Wall flew past him as he rocketed upwards, swinging a sword up. "This is our chance! Don't let it slip away!" He catapulted himself upwards, bursting through a cloud of the Colossal's steam. He spun in the air, propelled by a burst of steam, and landed on the Wall in a crouch, boots skidding along the stone.

Mikasa's heart was pounding in her chest, ready to break free and explode from her breast. "That was dangerous," she choked out.

"Mikasa—" Eren began.

"That was the *Colossal Titan*, Eren!" Her wild panic was beginning to melt into incensed disapproval. "The *Colossal*. That thing took down two Walls, how could you think—"

"What made *you* think you could take on a herd of Titans without any gas?" he spat back.

Mikasa froze, but not because of his harshness or sharp reprimand. "How did you know about that?" she asked slowly.

Eren blinked. *How* did *I know that?* "I—" he hesitated, frowning. "Armin told me. . ?" He trailed off, unsure.

"No, I didn't," Armin, who'd been listening, waiting for a cue to break up the impending argument, interrupted.

The three exchanged a confused look. "Weird," Eren muttered, furrowing his brow.

Steam and embers flew around him as he looked up slowly, glaring at the Colossal. "Hey, you," he growled, locking eyes with the Titan. "It's been a while."

Episode – 5: First Battle: The Struggle for Trost, Part 1

Eren panted, boots hitting the steaming stone of the Wall as he ran at the Colossal Titan, swords out. The Titan turned slowly towards him, raising an arm and swinging it forwards.

"He's moving so slowly," Krista observed.

"Must be all that weight," Moblit mused. "I know Titans are light—" the corners of Hange's lips flicked up into a tiny smirk, "—but, at that size? Even he's got to be feeling the drag."

Sasha shuddered. "Imagine if that thing had fallen over," she said. "It would have crushed the Wall whole!"

"Don't say that," Connie groaned. "I've got enough nightmares!"

Eren gasped, leaping out of the way just before the skinless limb struck the Wall, shattering cannons and wood like toothpicks and sending shrapnel flying through the air. Explosions erupted along the top of the Wall as the Colossal dragged its arm across it, crushing stone and weapons.

"The heat from his body's lighting the gunpowder!" Hange gasped in realization. "Sina's tits! Was it the proximity of his arm to the powder? Or did he actually touch the fuse? No, but it's so *small!* Maybe—" They began scribbling in their notebook, tip of their pen nearly tearing through the paper. "Or was it contact with the *barrels*? The heat could have built up inside, like an oven, lighting the gunpowder—Eren!" they shouted, snapping their notebook shut with a loud *clap*.

Eren wasn't the only one who jumped at Hange's exclamation, nearly falling off the couch. "Yeah? I mean, yes, Squad Leader?"

"How hot was the Colossal Titan?" Hange demanded. Bertolt sank down a bit lower in his seat, as if he could melt into the couch and vanish altogether.

"Uh." Eren blinked, glancing at Bertolt out of the corner of his eye with a small frown of confusion. "Hot?"

Hange nodded seriously, opening their notebook and writing *HOT* in large capital letters, circling it once, twice, three times. "Thank you, Eren," they said solemnly.

"No problem?"

Eren shot an anchor out as he fell, lodging it in the Colossal's shoulder and swinging around it. *He took out the cannons!* As Eren watched, a barrel fell from its stand, the tracks bent and misshapen. *The gate was no accident*. Smoke was still rising from the scorched-black hole in the stone below, dispersing through the air. *He has*. . . Eren's eyes were bright with fury as he glared at the Titan, the realization finally registering in his mind. *Intelligence!*

"Seriously?" Sasha's eyes widened. Bertolt swallowed a squeak, anxiously nibbling through a handful of crackers.

"I guess it does make sense," Eld said. "I've gotta admit, though, I've never considered the possibility."

"Do you think he's a Shifter, too?" Petra wondered. Levi tensed, and Erwin's gaze flicked over to the group.

"It would make sense, wouldn't it?" Gunther nodded.

"But then *why?*" Krista asked. "Why would a human do something like that?"

Eren scowled. "Monster," he growled.

Connie nodded vehemently in agreement. "He's gotta be some kind of sicko," he said.

I don't want to imagine it, Jean thought, feeling his stomach roll at the notion. *That anybody would* willingly *do that, knowing they were damning thousands of people. . .* He shook his head. "There's gotta be another reason," he said aloud. "I mean, maybe it's not a Shifter. It could just be a Titan who's got Intelligence."

"Well, if he's intelligent, then the Armoured must be, too." Sasha reasoned. Reiner flexed his fingers, clenching his fist. "I mean, they're both the abnormal-est Abnormals we've ever seen, right?"

The Colossal's fingers suddenly burst through a cloud of steam, curving around Eren.

Gasps filled the room, people stiffening and looking over at the real-life Eren, as if to assure themselves that he hadn't in fact, fallen victim to the monstrous fingers.

He gasped, barely dodging out of the way in time, an anchor digging into the crook of the Titan's elbow.

Sighs of relief fell from nearly every mouth. Mikasa slowly uncurled her fists, nails leaving angry red marks in their wake.

All the more reason not to waste this moment!* He landed on the Titan's arm in a crouch. *Without him, the other Titans have nothing!

"Do you think there are others?" Moblit wondered. "Colossal Titans, I mean—after all, he can't be the *only* one."

Hange hummed, scribbling it down in the corner. "Maybe," they said. "Look at his face, though—it's the same one that kicked down Wall Maria." Armin grimaced, and Bertolt gulped.

"Oh!" Sasha gasped. "What if he *is* the only one?" she suggested. "And he's like. . . like. . . the ringleader! No, not ringleader," she backtracked. "Like. . ."

"A Titan King!" Connie exclaimed.

"No way." Jean wrinkled his nose. "Most Titan can't even figure out that swords are bad for them. I doubt they're smart—or organized—enough to have a leader system like that."

"Maybe a hivemind sort of thing, then!" Hange suggested.

Erwin nodded. "What do you think?" he asked, turning to the back of the room.

Bertolt nearly jumped out of his skin, and Reiner's arms twitched. "I don't know," Annie replied, shrugging expressionlessly. "As long as they don't eat me, I don't care."

"I think all the theories make sense," Reiner said. "I don't know which one I agree with, though." Bertolt nodded, a bead of sweat hanging onto his earlobe dancing wildly.

Eren ran up the Titan's arm, brandishing his swords. *I've got to take him down!*

The Titan regarded him coldly, raising its arm. Eren shouted as he stumbled, falling off the Colossal's shoulder.

"Look at the way it's looking at him," Sasha muttered.

Connie nodded. *It's eyes are so cold*. "It's like he's staring at an insect," he agreed.

"Damnit!" Eren swore loudly, shooting an anchor between its shoulder blades and swinging around its back in a wide arc. He swung back and forth wildly in the air as he shot another anchor forwards, yanking himself towards the Titan's nape at breakneck speed. *Take this!*

A few people couldn't resist curling their hands into fists, chanting quiet encouragement, despite knowing full well that he would fail. Eren scowled at his past self, obviously disgruntled at his failure.

The image froze as Eren swung his swords forwards, blades mere inches from the bulge of the Titan's nape.

"Huh?" Hange cried. "What's going on, Eren?"

"I don't know!" He stared at the screen, bewildered.

"Is the screen going to do the—" Sasha moved her hands around in front of her. "That. . . I don't know, spiral thing? With the diagrams?"

The Colossal shut its eyes, and steam suddenly erupted from every inch of its body.

Bertolt winced, rubbing the back of his neck as shouts filled the room.

"Holy shit!"

Eren let out an exclamation of shock as the force shoved him away. Eren squeezed his eyes shut, peering through his eyelashes as he flapped up and down in the air like a flag in a gale, trying desperately to fly, against the current of the blazing steam, towards the Titan.

"Let go, you idiot!" Gunther yelled.

"You're going to get roasted alive!" Eld exclaimed.

"I couldn't!" Eren shouted back. "It was the closest anyone'd gotten in five years!"

"It's not *you* we're worried about!" Gunther told him. "It's your *gear!*"

His sweat-soaked fingers finally managed to push down on the triggers, and his cables retracted, sparks flying as his ODM gear shuddered in protest. "Here I come!" he yelled, raising his swords and swinging in a wide arc.

"How the *fuck* did that work?" Jean demanded. "You shouldn't even be able to hold onto your swords at that point!"

The steam dispersed as Eren's blades sliced through it, smoke and embers drifting away in the light, midday breeze. He gasped, eyes widening. *How'd I miss?*

"What the *fuck?*" Oluo's jaw dropped, eyes bugging out of his skull.

"He's gone!" Petra exclaimed. "He just—*vanished!*"

"How is that even possible?" Moblit stared at the TV, shocked. "Even if it was a Shifter, the body'd still be left behind, right?"

"And it's not like you'd just *miss* something that big high-tailing its way back into Titan territory," Mike chimed in.

"Weird," Jean muttered.

His eyes widened even further as he began falling, the pull of gravity taking hold of him once more. His cables arched through the air, anchor hitting the top of the Wall. Dust rose from beneath his boots as he skid along the surface of the Wall, staring at the place where the monstrous Titan had been just seconds before. *Did he just vanish into thin air?* All that was left to remind that the Colossal had, in fact, been present, were three steaming craters—and, of course, the gaping hole in the Wall.

"What are those three holes on the ground?" Sasha asked.

"Well, two of those have gotta be his feet," Jean reasoned. "The third one, though. . ." He trailed off with a shrug.

"Well," Connie said, wiggling his eyebrows, "who knows? Maybe the Colossal's got a bit more extra *appendage* than the other Titans, if you know what I—"

"Oh, gross," Ymir muttered, making a gagging motion. Bertolt flushed, tips of his ears turning red as Jean rolled his eyes, grabbing Connie's face and shoving him away ("Be serious, cueball!").

"Eren!" Thomas's gear clanked as he ran forwards, skidding to a stop on the edge of the Wall and peering over the edge. "Where'd he go? Did he get away, or did you take him out?"

"He's gone!" Eren yelled back. "Exactly like five years ago." He turned to look back at the destruction. "He's here one moment, and gone the next. . . just like that."

"When they said he 'vanished', I thought they meant. . ." Mike waved a hand vaguely. "I dunno. Ran off really quickly? Ducked behind the Wall and burrowed through the ground?"

"Ooh, burrowed through the ground?" Hange perked up. "Maybe that's what the crater in the middle was for! That would be interesting, actually: a Titan that could dig!"

"Sina, no," Levi grumbled. "We have enough *normal* Titans to deal with already—you really want one that could make a tunnel under the fucking Wall?"

"But think of the experiments—!"

"I'd rather not, thanks."

The inside of the tunnel had been decimated, rubble stacked up like children's blocks, and cracks spidering through what remained of the gatehouse Walls, creeping through the singed red bricks.

Petra frowned. "Why do you supposed they always attack the Gates?" she wondered, turning to her teammates on the couch. "I mean, if they're smart enough to knock the Walls

down and escape right afterwards, then shouldn't they know that other parts of the Wall are less tightly guarded?"

Eld pursed his lips, turning her words over in his mind. "Maybe they. . . don't?" he suggested. "Or they're trying to take out as many humans as they can with a huge bang?"

"You guys are saying this as if the Titans actually know what's going on in the military," Oluo broke in. "I mean, for all we know, these freaks could just spawn out of nowhere and vanish into thin air again."

"Maybe," Gunther muttered. "But do you really think that's possible? Based on everything we know and have seen so far, it's pretty much a given that those two are Shifters."

Eld frowned, brows knitting together. "It's. . . just a theory I've got," he said, slowly, quietly. "But. . ." he cleared his throat discreetly. "Do you guys think it could be possible that the Titans have a spy on the inside?"

"What?" Petra hissed. "Is that even *possible*?"

"No, no." Gunther shook his head. "I think I get what you mean."

"I don't!" Oluo protested.

Petra nudged him sharply in the ribs. "Neither do I," she admitted ("Then why the hell did you elbow me?" Oluo wailed). "But. . . Eld, if you're serious, and if you're *right*, then this isn't something we can talk about here—not without attracting attention, anyways."

Eld nodded. "Meet at the next break," he instructed. "We'll talk about it, then."

"I'm sorry." Embers and steam were still drifting through the air as Eren stood on top of the Wall, speaking to Thomas while Connie stared over the side, eyes wide. "I. . ."

"At least you actually moved," Sasha said. "The rest of us just hung there and stared."

"Not you," Eren replied. "You saved Samuel, remember?"

"Besides," Moblit chimed in, spotting the uncomfortable looks on Connie's face. "It's not your fault. You've never even *seen* a Titan before, let alone the Colossal. Eren's seen it before, and he's been gunning for revenge for half a decade."

Bertolt looked down, playing with a frayed string on his jacket. *If they only knew how wrong they were*.

"Don't apologize," Thomas told him. "Look at us. We were too scared to even move."

Krista frowned, tilting her head as she observed the scene. *Something seems off about this. . . but what?*

"Hey!" Connie shouted, looking over at Eren, scowling when he saw him looking at the ground. "Wallow in your own time! In case you haven't noticed, there's a breach." He turned away, gritting his teeth. "We have to act now! If they start pouring in, that's it!"

"Hate to say it, but I agree with the idiot," Ymir said. "The longer you stand there, beating yourself up, the more ground the Titans make."

"Speaking of the Titans," Armin said, frowning. "Has anybody else noticed? They're not pouring in, like at Maria."

"That's right!" Krista exclaimed. "I knew there was something wrong, I just couldn't put my finger on it! Last time, when Shinganshina fell—" She paused, glancing at the trio at the front of the room. Eren shrugged, and Armin smiled, waving a hand at her, mouthing *it's fine*. She smiled back, and continued. "When the Colossal Titan attacked Shinganshina, Titans were flooding into the city almost immediately. But, here. . . it's got to be at least five minutes since the Gate was kicked down, but there still isn't a single Titan in sight."

"Could it be because there just weren't as many Titans in the area?" Mikasa suggested. "I mean, there were always Titans clawing around outside Shinganshina's Walls. Was it different with Trost?"

"I don't think so." Jean shook his head. "Trost is—was—the business capital of the Walls. There were even more people living there before the Battle."

Then why were the Titans so quick to flood into Shinganshina? Erwin wondered. *And what was it about this attack that was different?*

"Look alive!" The graduates turned to look as a dark-haired Garrison soldier with a short, scruffy beard landed on the edge in a crouch. "Operation Colossal Titan Response is in effect, and I expect you to take part!" Another soldier landed on the Wall next to him as he continued addressing the cadets. "Report to HQ!" The boys stood in sharp salute, faces tense. "If you got close to the damn thing, we need details."

"Sir!" Connie shouted, spine ramrod stiff. "We pray the Advance Team will be victorious!"

Eren grimaced, and Connie bit his lip.

"He fucking jinxed it," Oluo muttered, barely audible. Petra glared at him, kicking his foot. "Joking!" he hissed. "Joking."

Eren's eyes were wide, brow furrowed in anger and anticipation, staring straight ahead as the Garrison members ran past, leaping down onto the other side of the Wall.

Screams and frantic, running footsteps echoed through the streets, mixing with the steady tolling of the bell as it swung back and forth in its tower. A young man with a sack slung over his shoulder ran past a hunchbacked old woman, joining the flood of people running through town, screaming in terror.

"There's so many people," Sasha muttered. *Seeing it from above is one thing, but to be so close. . .* She chewed the inside of her cheek, mouth tight, as she watched the footage. *It's like we're really there. And it's terrifying*.

A little girl gasped, reaching out desperately over her father's shoulder as her doll fell to the ground, quickly trampled by the hordes of people.

Any one of the kids in the crowd could have ended up like us. Mikasa thought back to the little girl who'd saluted her, eyes wide in awe. *No. . . just because they managed to escape, doesn't mean that they didn't suffer, too. Their home was torn apart, and their lives will never be the same*. She bit her lips, picking at her nails. *I just wish we could've done* more.

"It was almost a repeat of five years ago," Armin said quietly, voicing her thoughts. "We're lucky we managed to block the hole in time."

Eren grinned ruefully, nudging him lightly in the side. "All thanks to you," he said. "We never would've been able to plug up the Wall—hell, we never even would've made it out of the Battle alive, if it weren't for your brains."

"Thanks." Armin smiled back weakly. "You did all the heavy lifting, though." *And, even then*, he thought as they turned back to the TV, *there was so much that could've gone wrong—so much that depended on pure chance. None of us could've predicted that Eren could turn into a Titan. The rock might've been too heavy. He could've been eaten before we even found out who he really was*. He shook his head. *This world. . . there's so much that happens just by* chance*. No, not chance*. He frowned, remembering their circumstance. *I guess, in our case, it's not really chance, is it?* He smiled blandly, mouth twisting into what was almost a grimace. *God playing literaly games with our universe. Or whatever else he wants to call it*.

"Pare down!" a brown-haired young soldier shouted, waving an arm for the peoples' attention. "Take only what you need to survive!" A sea of people congregated at the Gate, creating a bottleneck at the entrance. "File through as calmly as possible!"

"Like that'll work," Ymir muttered. "People are too optimistic. They forget: at the core, humans are just as rabid as any wild animal. The tiniest spook'll send anyone into a mad panic." *Frankly, I'm surprised that guy wasn't run over during the evacuation*. She wrinkled her nose. *Or maybe he was. Who knows?*

On the other side of the town, soldiers surrounded the broken Gate. "You understand what we're facing." Fresh spikes had been fixed in the pits and littered around on the ground, and new cannons had been rolled out, pointed at the net-covered hole. "If they get through, we'll have a repeat of five years ago." Soldiers stood on top of the Wall, swords out as they watched the Titans approach. "Consider this the last line of defence! The Titans get held off here or nowhere!"

Krista shuddered at the sight of the Titans. "No matter how many times I see them," she said, "they never get any less scary."

"Aye." Mike wrinkled his nose at the screen. "You got that right."

"Does it ever get better?" Sasha asked apprehensively.

Moblit shrugged uncommittedly. "Not really," he admitted. "Eventually, it just becomes a sort of habit. Routine."

"Frankly," Eld hopped into the conversation, "the reason most of us don't shit our pants anymore when seeing the weirdos is because we've seen what happens when you freeze—"

"And it's much worse than just being scared of their faces," Jean muttered. "Yeah. We know." Marco glanced away, toying with the knee of his jeans.

A dark-haired soldier wound up a cannon's gear, adjusting its position. "Prepare to intercept!" Another soldier raised his hands from the barrel, pulling the pin out. "Fire!" They clapped their hands over their ears as their third comrade yanked the string, hard.

The *boom*s of the cannons could be heard for miles as they fired off round after round, clouds of smoke and flame erupting from their open mouths. The Titans fell quietly, stumbling as their legs were shot out from beneath them, or staggering back as their heads or necks were blown clean off.

"Do they even feel pain?" Sasha asked. "Well, yeah, I know they do, but do they even *care*? The way they're falling right now—it's like they're puppets who've just got their string cuts." *They're completely silent. It's like they haven't even noticed that they've died*.

"Nah," Ymir said suddenly. Sasha blinked, looking at her in surprise. The freckled girl had been the last person she'd expected to answer. Ymir glanced at her, seeming just as surprised as she had—she hadn't meant to say it out loud. "Nah," she repeated, shrugging. "I don't think they care. It's probably just a minor inconvenience to them. After all, they've got bigger things to worry about. I mean," she gestured at the TV, "there's tons of humans right there, right? They're probably focused on getting—" she faltered for a second, "—them."

"I guess that makes sense." Sasha shrugged, writing off the other girl's strange behaviour in her mind; after all, they were about to relive what had been the worst day in most of their lives. Everyone was a bit on edge. A little bit of stuttering was hardly unexpected.

"Soldiers!" an officer shouted, "charge!"

The Garrison members let out resounding battle cries as they ran forwards, blades out and at the ready, leaping off the Wall.

The room was silent, the knowledge of the soldiers' fates heavy on everyone's minds.

They've improved, thought Erwin, *since Wall Maria.* He sighed. *Just not enough*.

"Out of the frying pan and into the fire, cadets!" Graduates ran back and forth within Headquarters, restocking blades and gas, checking supplies, or just panicking in general. "Time to put your training to work!"

Franz stood in a quiet corner of the room, hands placed reassuringly on Hannah's shoulders. "I promise we'll get through this," he assured her. "You're safe as long as I'm beside you."

That backfired, Jean was tempted to say aloud. He clenched his teeth, jaw tightening at the memory of a dead-eyed Hannah being lifted from beside Franz's severed body, tears still running down her blank, expressionless face.

"At least they're in a better place now," Sasha said quietly, then winced at the sound of the words. *A better place* made it sound too much like they were dead—which, they, well, *were*, but it was so much *more* than that.

"Franz," she whispered, voice shaky. He pulled her into a tight hug, wrapping his arms around her as she placed her head on his chest. Mikasa ran up behind them, stuttering to a stop to stare at them for a moment before turning and continuing on her way.

Connie couldn't stop the tiny giggle that fell from him at the sight. "She looks so confused," he whispered, covering his mouth so those at the front wouldn't hear him.

"I'd be confused too," Jean whispered back. "Their squad left HQ five minutes ago."

She stopped in the middle of the room, looking frantically from side to side. "Armin?" She turned at the sound of the familiar name and voice. "What's wrong?" Eren demanded.

"I. . ." Armin's eyes were wide, staring blankly ahead, as he fumbled with a gas canister. "Don't worry, I'm fine." He gulped, sweat running down his face. "Just give me a second for my nerves to settle."

Gunther opened his mouth, ready to offer reassurement to the boy—even steeling himself to tell the embarrassing story of his first Expedition, where he fell off his horse and was nearly trampled by the rest of the brigade just at the mere *sight* of a Titan in the distance—when Petra nudged him lightly. "I don't think we need to say something every time we see something like this on screen," she whispered. "It'll probably embarrass him even more to have everyone jump in and comfort him every time his past self sweats a bit."

"Right," Gunther said. "That makes sense. Got it."

Mikasa walked up to the boys. "This is bad, isn't it?" he said. "There's a hole in the Wall eight metres wide, and we don't even remotely have the engineering know-how to plug it."

Hange wrinkled their nose. *It's ridiculous*, they thought, *that we've gone over a hundred years inside these Walls, and still haven't figured out a way to properly plug them*. They frowned. *I mean,* somebody *had to build them, first. So why can't we just use the same technology to fix the Gates?* They sighed, making a tiny note in the corner of a slightly less clustered page. *Questions, questions, and more questions, but still no answers*.

"*The big boulder near the gate was our best bet*. . ." An image of said boulder, nestled in the centre of a group of houses, like some sort of bizarre, shared backyard decoration. "*But we couldn't figure out how to hoist it into place.*

"Unless we seal the breach," Armin's hands shook, the gas tank slipping again, "the entire city's good as dead!"

"It was a good thing that that boulder was even there, in the first place," Sasha said. "I can't imagine any other way we could've fixed it, otherwise."

"We were lucky," Mike agreed with a nod.

"There aren't always going to be a pile of convenient, big-ass rocks lying around, though," Levi said with a frown. "Can't the shitty Engineer Corps figure out a better way to plug these holes?"

"That's what I was thinking!" Hange exclaimed ("Ew," Levi muttered, wrinkling his nose, receiving a small chuckle from Erwin at his antics. "Shut up," he grumbled.). "I mean, it's been over a century! If we've figured out a way to make humans fly, why can't we figure out a way to build better equipment to repair the Walls?"

"It's all the Wall Church's fault," Eren said vindictively. "They guard the things like they're priceless treasures."

Jean nodded. "There was a spot near the Wall where we used to play, back when the Church was just starting to gain footing," he told them. "We were playing hoops one day, and one of them bounced off the side. There was a Wall priest walking by, and, I swear to Rose, I've never heard anyone yell that loudly—well, maybe other than Eren when he's talking about Titans." The brunet shifter flipped him off casually. "I don't think I've ever run that fast before—we never even got to go back for the hoop."

"They're morons, that what they are," Gunther decided. "Haven't they ever thought about how many lives could be saved if they just let us take a look at the Walls?" Reiner and Annie exchanged a furtive glanced, and Bertolt fidgeted, left foot tapping the floor jitteringly.

More cannons rang out atop the Wall, the projectiles sending up clouds of dust when they missed the Titans and hit the ground instead. "*How long do you think before they take Wall Rose?*" A brown-haired Titan dragged itself forwards, steam pouring off the end of its severed torso, teeth bared in an eternal growl.

"Oh, Walls," Krista whispered, clutching her mouth. Sasha squeaked, making a gagging noise behind her hand.

"It's like they don't even have souls," Jean said. "Like. . . they've got one purpose, and that's to fucking *eat*."

"They're like devils," Sasha muttered, voice muffled from behind her hand. "Devils that crawled out of the ground, straight from Hell itself."

Ymir grimaced, and Eren frowned. *Devils. . ?*

"*Seriously, how long?*" Another Titan sat up, pushing itself up on its arms, blood and steam streaming from a hole in its shoulder and its crushed face. "*Think about it*." The Titan raised its head, skin pulled tight over its fleshless skull, eyeballs bugging out as it grinned up at the soldiers.

Marco shuddered, thinking back to the time when he'd walked past a vintage oddity store during their training exercise in Trost. There, right in the middle of the display window, had been a wax doll, face half-melted from the heat of the day and the sun streaming through the glass. Its glass eyes had been bugging out, thin strands of woven silk hair wispy and falling out in tufts from it's drooping skull. The Titan's face was disturbingly similar to that doll.

Not for the first time, he wondered if it had been a good idea to stay behind and watch with the others.

"*Any time the mood strikes them, they can wipe out the human race in an afternoon!*" A younger soldier reeled back in horror, staring, aghast, down at the torn and bloody bodies that already littered the ground.

But that's not true, is it? Mikasa frowned. *The Titans hadn't done anything for a hundred years. Humanity was practically untouchable to them—well, other than the Scouts.* She pursed her lips, thinking. *They only became a real threat to people living in the Walls when the Colossal and Armoured Titan appeared. But, if their goal was to end humanity the whole time, why did they wait so long to attack?* She furrowed her brows. *And why didn't they just take all of us out at once?*

"Armin!" Armin jumped as Eren clapped his hands down on his arm. "Listen to me." His green eyes were bright in the dim lighting of the warehouse, face set in determination. "You're focused on the past. Look ahead. We're not going to be the victims anymore!"

Spoke too soon. Ymir wrinkled her nose.

Silence fell, stretching endlessly as the three friends waited, shock-still. "Sorry," Armin finally whispered. Mikasa stared at him, brow furrowed in worry. "I. . . I'm okay."

A massive hand slowly reached forwards, titanic fingers curling around the side of the broken Wall. A ginormous, lipless face peered out from the hole, eyes wide, veins visible, criss-crossing beneath the Titan's thick skin.

"Look!" Connie suddenly exclaimed. "Its face—it's got the same tooth thing as Eren!"

"What tooth thing?" Jean asked, staring at Connie incredulously, as if he'd grown a second head. "What are you talking about?"

"You know!" Connie said. "The thing!" He dragged a finger along his cheek, on the skin over where his teeth travelled along his jawbone in his mouth. "The thing where the skin on his face doesn't cover his mouth—"

"Oh," Moblit said, "*that* thing." He nodded at the Titan on screen. "Yeah, I see it, now."

"It's a lot less prominent than Eren's, though," Armin commented.

Petra nodded. "Eren's is almost signature," she said. "I've never seen anything else like it, before."

The Titan stood up slowly, looking around before walking forwards joining its fellows as they moved past the crushed fortifications and fallen soldiers.

The preparations were useless, Krista thought, staring at the giants lumbering past the corpses tossed about like broken dolls at their feet.

Sasha felt sick, stomach rolling, as she watched a large-bellied Titan slowly pulling itself out of a pit with its short, stubby arms, spikes crushed beneath it. *Is there really* nothing *humans can do that can hold them off?* On-screen, a Titan was dragging itself forwards at the

pace of a snail, a fallen wall pinning it to the ground. *It's like they're kicking down a little kid's toy set!*

Tiny yellow butterflies flittered over a meadow of emerald green grass and pale pink and yellow flowers, drifting peacefully about in the air. Brilliant beams of sunlight shone down behind them, making the surface of a vivid blue lake sparkle like a pool of scattered diamonds.

"Where is that?" Connie asked.

"Sina?" Jean shrugged. "Maybe interior Rose?"

In the centre of the lake, on a pristine, green island, sat a castle, turrets and walls rising high into the air, sitting above the rest of the valley like a king residing over the court on his throne.

"It's beautiful," Petra said.

"It's like someone pulled a fairytale castle out of a storybook," Sasha said, "and made it into reality."

"How many people live in there?" Connie asked, awestruck. "You could fit my entire village in one of the towers!"

"Come, now. Take this seriously." Deep mulberry drapes had been pulled back, tied with thick braids of gold, letting the clear sunlight stream through the window and onto a delicately carved chess set. "Very well. Yet another victory is mine." Fat fingers reached down, picking up a white pawn and replacing it with a black rook.

"Who the hell is that?" Ymir demanded, scowling at the thick, pompous voice.

"I have no clue," Mike said, looking just as, if not more, confused as the recruits.

The camera showed a wide shot of the courthouse-sized room, empty save for the two men at the chess set and their sets of aides behind them: two Garrison soldiers, a man and woman, and two men dressed in rich, layered robes, respectively. "Dear, oh dear." On the far side of the room was a banner, at least three men tall, displaying the noble's family crest: a white horse on a background split between pink and green.

"Holy fuck!" Jean exclaimed. "That room is *huge!*"

"And fancy." The multi-coloured, complicated patterns of the polished tile floor was making Armin's head spin.

"And *empty*." Levi scowled. "All they've got in there's a table and that huge-ass banner. Who the hell even needs that much space for a game?"

"Nobles." Moblit sighed wearily.

"I recognize that crest," Erwin said. "The Wald family."

"That must be Lord Wald, then," Eld said.

"One would think our monthly rows would show at least modest improvement in your approach to the game, Pixis."

“Pixis?” Sasha’s eyebrows flew up.

“What’s he doing there?” Krista wondered.

“Keeping up appearances, probably,” Ymir said. “I can’t think of any other reason anyone would want to spend time with that bag of jelly.”

“One would think so, yes.” The Commander smiled demurely, eyes fixed on the man in front of him as he raised a hand, rubbing his bald head. “Clearly my brain is inferior to yours, Lord Wald.”

“That’s a lie,” Gunther muttered.

“God, I am so glad that *we* don’t have to do that shit,” Eld muttered. Regular soldiers—even ones as distinguished as members of the Special Operation’s Squad—rarely got invited to events where they would be around the higher members of society. He’d attended a fundraising ball, as Levi’s second-in-command, once, and it had been enough to drive him away from all thoughts of attending any more events for good.

The massive, round man sitting across from him threw back his head, wine sloshing about in his glass, stomach and chins jiggling as he laughed. “Such obsequiousness from the single highest ranking officer in the southern land.”

“That’s revolting.” Sasha wrinkled her nose as she slowly put down her half-eaten ham sandwich.

“How the hell does he even know what that word means?” Levi scoffed. “He doesn’t look like he’d be able to tell a fucking chicken apart from a damned hawk.”

“*I* don’t even know what that word means,” Eren grumbled.

“Obedience, basically,” Armin explained.

His sausage-like fingers fished about on a tray, grabbing a handful of small, carefully decorated cookies and shoving them all into his mouth in one go with careless abandon.

Sasha made a small, horrified noise, clutching her chest, a hand flying up to cover her mouth.

“What the fuck?” Ymir turned, maneuvering herself and Krista on the beanbag chair to shoot Sasha a bewildered look. “Isn’t that just what you’d do?”

“Not like *that!*” Sasha looked close to tears. “He isn’t respecting the cookie at all!”

“*‘Respect the cookie’*?” Eren demanded. Armin choked on a sip of coffee, cheeks turning a deep red as he coughed, hitting himself in the chest.

Jean groaned, putting his face in his hands. “I’m surrounded by idiots.”

“Tell me. Seriously.” He looked over Pixis’s shoulder, cheeks rosier than those of a newborn baby, looking at where Anka and Gustav stood, standing at attention in parade rest. “How can you hope to thwart the Titans when you can’t even win—”

“How dumb can you get?” Levi rolled his eyes.

“Like *anyone* could beat Pixis when he actually puts his mind to something,” Hange snorted. “Well, except for Erwin,” they said after a moment of consideration.”

"He'd be a challenge, even for me," Erwin said. "There is a reason even the MPs respect him, after all."

"Commander Pixis, sir!" The two soldiers glanced to the side as a young Garrison recruit ran forwards, stumbling as he snapped his arms to his side, sweat pouring down his face as she stood stiffly before the others. "I bring news!"

They were torn from their light-hearted chatter by the somber reminder of what was happening at the very moment in Trost.

"I beg your pardon, young man!" A plump, blue-robed servant with a head of dark curly hair ran after him, chest heaving as he panted, holding his hands up in front of him. "This is a private—"

"The Colossal Titan has laid siege to the city of Trost!" the sandy-haired soldier shouted. Anka and Gustav inhaled sharply, staring at their comrade, aghast. "Reports say the Gate has been destroyed!"

Armin pursed his lips, thinking of his past self's rambling in the heart of headquarters earlier in the episode. *If only they'd arrived sooner. Would it have made a difference? Or would it have just been a bigger massacre?*

Wald's goblet fell to the ground, shattering into tiny shards of crystal, the wine pooling slowly across the polished tile floor. A horrified silence filled the room, all eyes on the recruit. Pixis was the one to finally move, reaching forwards and picking up the half-full bottle in front of Wald. The noble stared, shocked, as the Commander lifted the bottle to his lips, taking slow, relaxed gulps.

"Classic Pixis," Jean muttered, shaking his head at the memory of the cooking competition.

"Leave it to him to get drunk during a national crisis," Sasha agreed with a nod.

"That's gonna come to bite him in the ass one day," Marco said quietly.

He finally lowered the bottle with a satisfied sigh. "Ah." He smacked his lips. "This vintage is worthy of your good taste." He stood. "One man of action to another. I obsequiously accept it as a gift."

Ymir couldn't help but chuckle, despite the tension hanging in the air.

The old man turned, walking out of the room, as casual as if he were just leaving on another social call. "Oi!" Anka and Gustav nodded stiffly at Wald before turning and following their Commander. "Where are you going? Pixis, wait!"

"To fight a war," Oluo scoffed. "Maybe you've read about them? In a storybook, maybe?"

"Bold of you to assume he can read," Gunther snorted.

The fat noble wobbled to his feet, stumbling as he chased the soldiers through the courtyard. "You can't just march off! I command you to stay!" He and the yellow-robed servant were pale and panting, faces drenched with sweat, both cold and hot alike.

"*Why?*" Eren demanded. "What the fuck do you think he'll be able to do from your Wall-damned palace?"

"Preparations must be made!" Pixis ignored them, tucking his flask back into his jacket. "Assemble your troops and establish a garrison around my estate this instant! Damn it all. . ." The soldiers made no indication that they had even heard them as they turned the corner. "It's your sworn duty to defend us!"

"It's his duty to protect the people," Levi growled, baring his teeth in a cold sneer. "Last I checked, that didn't count brain-dead pigs who only care about themselves."

"What a shithead," Hange agreed, scowling. "There are people dropping like flies, and he's tossing back the wine like it's nothing!"

"People like him don't care about the consequences until it's staring them in the face." Mike glared at the screen.

Wald skidded to a halt as Pixis suddenly stopped, flailing his fat arms to avoid crashing into the Commander's back. "Lord Wald, sir." Pixis turned, looking down at the other man. "Untold numbers of our brave comrades-in-arms are laying down their lives in defence of Trost as we speak."

"Finally," Eren hissed, ignoring the twinging feeling in his stomach at the mention of the fallen soldiers. "Talk some sense into the walking shit."

"Commander," Anka told him, "I'll go ready the horses, sir."

Pixis nodded, never breaking eye contact with Wald. "When the dust has settled," he said, "there may well be more graves than people to dig them. An astronomical number of lives snuffed out in a twinkling."

"Yes, well," Wald gulped, "no help for it, is there? If it's their time."

"How *dare* he!" Petra shouted, leaping to her feet. "That little—he—what the—how could someone even—" Her hands twitched in front of her, fingers curling and jerking about. She finally flopped back down onto the couch after a minute of enraged spluttering, cheeks red with fury, chest rising and falling as she glared at the TV, teeth clenched, hands balled in fists at her sides.

"Bastard," Mike growled, eyes bright with a terrifying anger through the curtain of hair hanging over them.

"If you ask me," Oluo's snarled, voice hushed, "they should've sent the nobles off to reclaim Wall Maria instead of the refugees."

Rather than reprimanding him, Eld nodded darkly. "Their estates take up villages worth of space," he snarled. "And what're they doing on them? Disrespecting those who'd die to protect them and wasting their lives."

"They should have put him at the front of the charge." The men jumped as Levi spoke, despite Oluo's voice having been quiet, barely detectable by the blond man, let alone people on

other couches. “If you’re gonna fatten up the Titans,” he glanced at his squad members, voice ice-cold and dark, “you should at least give them some real chow.”

“Besides!” Wald continued, desperate, “what earthly good can the presence of a man who persistently loses to me at chess do for them now? Why not remain where I can assist you?”

“There really is no end to his blustering, is there?” Hange asked vaguely.

“Does he *really* think he’s *actually* smarter than Pixis?” Moblit stared at the screen. “A literal military commander?”

“Well, you know the saying,” Hange said. “Ignorance is blind.”

“I. . .” Armin said slowly, “don’t think that’s it.”

“Bliss, then,” Hange said. “Whatever. Same thing.”

“Your Lordship, if I may speak.” Wald whirled around, craning his neck to meet Gustav’s eyes. “Should the Commander actually face a Titan in battle, he won’t feel compelled to play down his skill as he does with you.”

“Yikes,” Sasha breathed. “That’s gotta sting.”

“*Roasted*,” Connie hissed, cupping his hands around his mouth.

Wald gasped, gritting his teeth as more beads of sweat appeared on his face. “That’s enough, soldier,” Pixis reprimanded. “Good day, sir.” He dipped his head at Wald. “I wish you another opulently appointed day of sloth and tranquility.”

“He really does *not* hold back,” Sasha said.

“I bet he’s been waiting to say that for years,” Jean said.

Wald stared in horror as Pixis and Gustav left. “Please don’t go,” he pleaded. “Don’t do this to me! Pixis, please!” He held his hands up in a desperate cry. “I’m begging you!” A lone butterfly fluttered past the castle, sunlight reflecting off its wings. “Pixis!”

Information Available for Public Disclosure

Wall Mounted Cannons, Part 1

A section of a Wall appeared on the screen, with the cannons, lined up neatly at even points on the tracks, circled helpfully. A line was drawn from one cannon to another bubble, showing the cannon from its front and side, as well as in action mode, with the barrel pointed straight down, over the side of the Wall.

Cannons were the chief weapon used against Titans before the advent of Omni-Directional Mobility gear. To compensate for this lack of mobility, cannons were mounted on Walls and modified for defensive use.

“I wish we could build some more accurate cannons,” Mike said. “It’d make things a lot safer when driving Titans away from the Walls.” Eld nodded in agreement.

Wall Mounted Cannons, Part 2

A diagram of a cannon, as well as where pins, projectiles, and other such parts were placed, appeared on the screen.

Grapeshot,* one projectile was labelled. *Not particularly deadly, but stop Titans in their tracks.

The other one was labelled as *Highly Explosive Shell*. *Highly destructive, but also incredibly imprecise, and difficult to accurately aim*.

"It's silly, isn't it?" Hange pondered. "That we have all these different types of projectiles, but we still don't have something that'll hit the nape dead-on."

"That's true," Jean said, remembering their lessons on the cannons, and what they'd seen during the battle. "Most of the time, they only slow the Titans down, or don't do anything at all."

"I want everyone to split into four quadrants, as practiced!" The graduates stood at parade rest in rows in front of a group of Garrison soldiers. "All squadrons are responsible for supply-running, message relay, and enemy combat under the command of the Garrison Regiment!" Woermann's eyes were wide, face drenched with panicked sweat as he shouted.

"Oh," Mikasa gave the screen a dead-eyed glare.

"I hate this guy," Eren muttered.

"I know him," Mike grunted. "I don't know how he got so high up in the ranks when he summons an entire squadron every time he sees a mouse."

"Oh, god, does he really?" Eren groaned.

"The Intercept Squadron will take the vanguard." An image of Trost appeared on screen, with red circles outlining the locations of the different squads: the vanguard at the front, near the Gate, followed by the middle guard, and the rearguard, guarding the Gate leading to the rest of Rose. "*Cadets will take the middle guard, led by the support squad. Rear guard will go to the elites*."

Eren looked up at Woermann, face set, gripping his arms tightly behind his back. "I expect you all to maintain your posts knowing the Advanced Team has been wiped out!" Woermann screeched.

So quickly, Connie couldn't help adding in his mind, squeezing his eyes shut—an action he instantly regretted. He flinched as images of the fallen Garrison soldiers flashed behind his eyelids, eyes flying open almost immediately.

"Makes you think," Ymir nearly whispered, voice barely audible to even Krista. "What did they think a batch of fresh recruits could do that the most advanced of the Garrison couldn't?" Krista didn't respond, pursing her lips.

Eren gasped, the cadets around him reacting, horrified, similarly. "That's right," Woermann told them, "the outer gate is history. The Titans are in." Armin and Mikasa, standing side-by-side, stared at the older soldiers in shock. "This means the Armoured Titan is

likely to appear," Woermann continued. "If and when he does—" the memory of the Armoured Titan smashing through Wall Maria, as if it were made of nothing more than thin paper, flashed through everybody's minds, "—the inner gate will also be history."

Why didn't he? Jean wondered for the millionth time. *Why, why, why?* The question bounced around in his head, met each time with a new theory, each one even less likely than the next. *Why? It had plenty of time, and even more opportunity. So* what happened *that made it*— He froze, blinking. *Wait*. He turned, eyes zeroing in on a head of messy brown hair in the front row.

"I—" Daz looked close to tears, sweat pooling in the wrinkles on his face. "Is this real?"

"Please be a dream," Thomas whispered.

"God," Nac muttered, "what if the bastard manages to bust through Wall Rose?"

"Quiet!" The graduates stiffened as Woermann yelled again. "Right," he shouted. "Those in the vanguard, get set. The whole area is saturated. Your mission is a very simple one: defend the Wall 'till the evacuation's done."

"Honestly!" Petra stared at the screen in shock. "What kind of orders are those? He might as well have just handed a toddler an onion and said, 'oh, go ahead, make me a five-course meal'!"

"He's frantic." Eld shook his head. "An officer should do better. He's just riling everybody else up and freaking them out."

Maybe more of them would have survived if they hadn't been as terrified, Ymir thought.

"Now," he lowered his gaze to glare at them, the ferocity of his expression only slightly dampened by the terror in his own eyes, "be aware, all of you, that desertion is punishable by execution." The cadets stared up at him, teeth grit in fear and horror. "If it comes down to it, lay down your lives! Dismissed!"

"What a speech," Gunther said sarcastically. "So rousing, and oh so very inspiring. Do you feel the glory rising up beneath your skin?"

"I can practically feel the dedication in my bloodstream," Oluo stated lazily, rolling his eyes.

"Sir!" the cadets saluted, despite their shaking hands and knocking knees.

The very ground seemed to shake as the cadets ran about the courtyard, joining up with their squads, hugging their friends goodbye, and performing last-second equipment checks. A few members of the top ten were gathered in the corner, along with Daz, who was on the ground, retching on his hands and knees.

"I'm surprised he's the only one, to be honest," Moblit said.

"I was almost down there with him," Connie admitted in a low mutter, scratching the back of his neck. "I guess it's lucky most of us didn't have time to get a proper lunch before they attacked."

“Why did this have to happen now?” Jean’s face was in his hands as he muttered incessantly, Bertolt watching him nervously. “Just one more day,” Jean ground out, “and I’d have been heading for the Interior!”

“That is really unlucky.” Petra nodded sympathetically.

“I guess,” Erwin said quietly, “in some way, we have to thank the Colossal Titan. After all, if it’d never attacked, we never would have found out about Eren’s powers. Or the spy,” he added, voice low, barely detectable.

Levi’s face remained blank, eyes fixed on the screen. “That’s twisted, old man.” He was nearly silent, the reflection of the images on screen flashing in his eyes.

“You’re not denying it.”

Both boys looked over at the sound of a loud gag, and vomit splattering on the ground. “You going to be all right?” Krista asked, rubbing his back comfortingly.

“Krista. . .” Jean shook his head. “You’re an angel.”

She flushed, ducking her head. “I was just helping out.” *I was just doing what any nice person would have done*.

“Yeah, but you were the only one.” Reiner piped up, speaking past the rest of his couch for the first time that episode. “Everyone else just ran past.”

“Yeah.” Ymir kept her gaze pinned on Reiner, watching him coldly from the corner of her eye. “You’re great.”

Daz forced himself into a kneeling position, lifting his head shakily to look at her for the fraction of a second before falling forwards again, stomach heaving up another round.

Levi wrinkled his nose.

Jean stared at them, eyes wide, and grit his teeth, forcing himself to stand and march forwards.

“Please, no.” A girl sat, curled up in the corner, face hidden in her knees as she prayed, whispering shakily. “Please, no. Please, no.” A boy sat on a crate next to her, elbows on his knees, golden hair hiding his face.

I never even knew their names, Eren realized, with no small amount of horror. *The girl—I think her friends might have called her Jenny? Greta?* His stomach churned. *I was so caught up with myself, I never even realized*. . . He glanced over his shoulder at Marco, remembering when Jean had informed him, coldly, detachedly, of his death. *Just because we didn’t see it on screen, doesn’t mean it doesn’t matter. These people—all of them had lives, had friends and family, and they lost them. . . for what?* His heart dropped. *The amusement of some people in a faraway universe who don’t even realize we’re real? So some Titans could chew ‘em up and spit them out again?* A familiar, raging heat flushed over him from head to toe. *Because some damned, skinless* bastard *decided to kick a fucking Wall down?* He clenched his fists and jaw, teeth creaking with the intensity of his anger. *Bastards.* Bastards.

Jean stomped past them, shoulders squared, eyes squeezed shut. He didn't even notice Eren down the hallway towards him until they collided, both of them stumbling past with grunts of pain and surprise.

They stared at each other for a moment before Jean grit his teeth, shoving the shorter boy out of the way. "Move it!" he snarled.

"Oi! What the hell, man?" Eren grabbed his arm, forcing him to look at him. "What's wrong with you?"

"I dunno," Connie nearly whispered, trying to break the tension in the room with a weak attempt at a joke. "Maybe the giant, man-eating monsters flooding in through a hole in the Wall has something to do with it." Sasha elbowed him, despite her own mouth tighter than a noble lady's corset to stifle her giggles.

"What kind of question is that?" Jean shouted back. "We're all about to be Titan chow." He grabbed Eren by the collar of his shirt, pulling him up onto his toes to glare into his eyes. "You want me to sing you a goddamn song?"

"If this were a musical?" Omni whispered, fingers flying across the screen of her square. "Yes."

Jean glared at her. "Is this funny to you?" he demanded in a low hiss.

"Focus on the screen."

"You talked first!"

She glared at him, pointing a manicured finger back at the screen. "TV. Watch."

He rolled his eyes. "'TV. Watch'," he mimicked, lips flapping as he turned back to the screen, glaring at it.

Mikasa was walking past on the other end of the hallway when she heard the faint echoes of the conversation. "You're loving this, aren't you, you little psycho?" Jean yelled as she turned, looking at them. "'Course you are!"

"Ouch," Petra whispered.

Jean grimaced. *I didn't realize she was watching*. His face flushed by half a shade as he watched himself panick on screen. *Mother of Titans, that's embarrassing*.

"Your life's aim was to get eaten!" Jean's voice climbed in octave and volume as he continued his tirade. "I was a day away from becoming an MP!"

"Jean!" Eren yelled, grabbing Jean's wrist. "Get a hold of yourself—!"

"For once, Eren's right," Ymir said, face screwed up, as if saying the words was causing her physical pain. "You don't have time for a scuffle, *or* for getting hurt. Idiots," she added with a scoff.

"No!" Jean shouted. "Not all of us are suicidal!"

"Damnit!" Eren tore himself away from Jean's grip, shoving him backwards. "Shut up for a second!" Jean grunted as his back hit a pillar with a *thump*. "We're trained for this!" Eren yelled, seizing Jean's own collar and yanking him down to meet his gaze.

“Long-ass speech coming in three, two, one. . .” Connie whispered. Jean glared at him, kicking at his leg. The bald boy snickered, yanking it away.

“What do you think the last three years were for?” Jean stiffened, staring down at the other boy. “We survived,” Eren growled, eyes flaring with the familiar bright intensity in the darkness of the corridor. “We stared death in the face and we lived. Not everyone can say that, can they? Some people couldn’t take it, and either ran or were thrown out. Hell, some people actually died, but not us!”

“You’re kidding.” Moblit’s eyes widened.

“I don’t remember cadets being that hard,” Mike muttered. “Hard, yeah, but not *that* hard.”

“You’re being serious?” Erwin asked. Eren shook his head, expression somber.

“I knew they buckled down after Wall Maria,” Hange said, “but I never thought it would be to *that* extent.”

“Most of them were accidents,” Jean said quickly, seeing the furrowed brows and concerned looks on the faces of the veterans. “I think there was only one where the guy actually collapsed from exhaustion.”

“Moher of Rose,” Eld muttered. “*Our* year didn’t even have any deaths, and we joined up right after Shinganshina!”

Jean stared at him incredulously, eyes wide, as he kept speaking. “Am I right? We powered through for three years! What’s one more day?” In the corner, the cadets who’d been sobbing their eyes out slowly lifted their heads, turning to listen to the confrontation. “You can do this, Jean,” Eren told him. “All right? The MP will still be waiting for you tomorrow.”

“I’m surprised you didn’t take the chance to bash him for his choice again,” Gunther said.

“The world was literally falling apart around us,” Eren said, a small furrow between his row. “I’m not *that* much of an asshole.”

“So you admit you’re an asshole.” Jean cocked a brow.

“Like you’ve got room to talk, Pony Boy!”

“Say that to my face, Steam Butt!”

Jean stared after him, frozen against the pillar, as Eren dropped him, stepping back. “Shit,” he finally spat, tearing his gaze away from Eren’s. “On your feet, Daz,” he ordered as he walked away, following the tail of his squad. “Stop bawling.”

Mikasa looked away from him, stepping forwards as Daz let out a small whimper, forcing himself to his feet. “Eren.” Eren turned to look at her as she stopped next to him, fists clenched by her side. “If things take a turn for the worse,” she said, “I want you to come find me, all right?”

“What?” Eren turned to stare at her in disbelief. “We’re in completely different squads!”

“I have to agree with Eren on this one,” Petra whispered. “She’s essentially telling him to ditch his squad in the middle of battle and find her in an active battlefield. She’s risking more than just two squads—that puts everyone in the sector in danger.”

Eld nodded in agreement, frowning. *Why is she so fixated on him?* he wondered. *It can’t just be because of her promise to his mother, can it? The depth of her dedication. . . it’s almost obsessive.* He furrowed his brow. *It just doesn’t feel* natural*.*

“Look.” Mikasa leaned forwards, brow furrowed in desperation as she tried to make Eren listen to her. “This is going to get ugly, and when it does, the plan goes out the window. Come and find me, so I can protect you.”

“But hasn’t it already gone ugly?” Connie asked, speaking to Sasha in a hush. “And, besides, how could she protect Eren *and* Wall Rose at the same time? We both know that one of those things matters a whole lot more, in her mind,” he added in a near-whisper.

“It’s *Mikasa*,” Sasha whispered back. “I’m sure she could do it, if she really put her mind to it.”

“Wh—” Eren scowled, leaning towards her, scowling. “Who the hell do you think you are—?”

“Ackerman.” Both of them whirled around to find Ian standing in the courtyard, watching them. “You’re with me. You’ve been assigned to the rear guard on special orders. Let’s get moving.”

“Impressive,” Mike said, “but not unexpected.”

“B—” Mikasa turned to him. “But, sir! I’m a cadet! I’ll slow everyone down!” Eren’s head swivelled around to stare at her, jaw dropping.

“No time for that,” Oluo said. “Obeying orders is a matter of life and death on the battlefield. Though,” he added with a loud sniff, “I doubt *you’d* understand what that *really* means, unless Mister Titan over there was involved—”

Petra scowled, slapping the back of his head. “Ignore him,” she told the pair in front as Gunther wordlessly placed a box of tissues on Oluo’s lap. Eren and Mikasa nodded, expressions curiously stony. She frowned, but made no inquiries, turning, instead to look back at the screen.

“What?” Ian frowned. “You’re not being asked for a self-evaluation here. The mass exodus is falling apart,” he told her. “We need as many elite soldiers as possible to get thing back on track.” He turned, walking across the courtyard, obviously expecting Mikasa to follow him.

“Sir!” Mikasa cried desperately. “With all due re—”

“Hey!” Eren darted in front of her, slamming his forehead against hers.

Jean grimaced, forehead smarting at the memory of the countless headbutts he’d received. “Ouch.”

"Was that on purpose?" Petra asked. "Or accident?"

"I honestly can't remember," Eren admitted. Mikasa grimaced, rubbing her forehead.

She stumbled backwards, wincing as she gingerly pressed her fingers to her skull. "You've been given a direct order!" Mikasa lowered her hands slowly, looking up at him. "Pull it together. Now!" He glared at her when she still didn't move. "This is bigger than the two of us, and you know it! We're on the verge of extinction, here. Get some damn perspective!"

"I can't believe it." Ymir shook her head. "Eren's actually the only one talking sense in this scene."

"Maybe because he's been waiting for it?" Krista suggested. "The others never really expected this to come—or they hoped it would never happen. He's been literally preparing himself for this his entire life."

Ymir rolled her eyes, but cooed, "You're so smart," nevertheless.

Mikasa stared at him, eyes wide, for one, two seconds, before lowering her head, looking at the ground. "You're right," she finally said after another moment of silence, voice soft, barely audible. "I'm sorry. This whole situation just has me out of my head." Eren tutted, turning to leave. "Just promise." He stopped as Mikasa reached out, grabbing his wrist. "Promise me one thing." He turned to look at her. Her head was bowed low, eyes and expression hidden behind her hair.

Connie shifted awkwardly. *This feels private*, he thought. *Even more than when we were watching people die*. He scratched his thigh, glancing at the wall. *There's something so solemn about it*.

A gentle breeze blew by, ruffling their hair, making her scarf and their jackets dance in the wind. "Whatever happens," she said, "don't get yourself killed."

Eren frowned at her, tugging his arm away and turning as the wind died. "I hadn't planned on it," he grumbled as he stalked away, leaving her standing in the shadows.

Eren toed at the carpet, back of his neck prickling and skin burning from the exasperated and accusing looks searing into his back. *Yeah*. He scowled. *Okay, I was a bit harsh, but*— He wet his lips, twiddling his thumbs awkwardly. *It was the middle of a battle! We barely had enough time to gear up, let alone exchange heartfelt goodbyes*. He chewed the inside of his cheek, looking back at the screen. *It was hardly* my *fault*.

"Thanks." He clenched his fists. *No*. He scowled. *I won't allow myself to get killed*.

But he almost did. Mikasa's stomach pitched at the memory, and she looked away.

And it was because of me. Armin closed his eyes for a fraction of a second, breathing in deeply.

A plume of thick, grey smoke rose from the centre of town, into the bright blue sky. *Not until I taste what life is like outside of these godforasaken Walls*.

Terrifying, Hange thought, remembering the disastrous results of their last mission. *Dangerous. Horrible. And. . .* They closed his eyes, thinking of open air, green fields rolling out as far as the eye could see, and pale white clouds, somehow even lighter and fluffier than the ones they saw from inside the Walls. *Strangely peaceful*.

He, Armin, Mina, and Thomas stood on a rooftop, faces blank and stony as they stared over the doomed city, fluffy white clouds drifting lazily by overhead.

The music's so upbeat, Sasha thought, *and the city really is beautiful.* She frowned. *If it weren't for the fact that we knew exactly what was happening—and what* would *happen—I'd think that everything was fine.*

"*What surviving historical documents we have access to tell us nothing of the Titans' origin. Almost everything about them is obscure*." A flickering memory of the silver-haired instructor standing in front of the class, reading from a textbook, appeared. "Now," he said, "that isn't to suggest we're completely ignorant."

But we are, Erwin thought. *Almost completely. There's still so much we don't know. We know how to kill them, but, beyond that?* He pursed his lips. *We didn't even really start studying them until fairly recently. How many more decades will it take before we learn even half of what we need to know?* He glanced down at the notes cluttering Hange's notebook, scribbled all over the pages, inside the margins, and even scratched into the cover. *Hopefully*, he looked back up at the screen, *the television can help us along—if not completely solve our problem for us*.

Armin, Eren, and Mikasa sat next to each other, Eren leaning forwards slightly, listening with rapt attention. "Thanks to the efforts of the Scout Regiment, we do know something of their ecology."

"I'm surprised that they kept that part in," Erwin said drily.

"Give credit where it's due," Hange sang.

"Whether Titans possess human-like intelligence is up for debate, of course. And, to date, there have been no reports of high-level communication between them."

"Wait!" Sasha said. "What about Ilse's journal? Doesn't that count?"

"No, they didn't." Armin shook his head. "This was during our first year, remember? Ilse didn't die—" he clamped his jaw shut. "Ilse didn't make contact," he corrected himself, "with the Titan until our second year, and they didn't find the diary until last year."

"You still remember that?" Krista asked, amazed. "I can't even really remember the details about what happened last episode!"

A drawing of a Titan appeared on screen, walking through a carefully-painted forest, thick, white steam rising from its shoulders, long, skinny arms hanging well past its waist. "*We do know that Titan physiology is fundamentally different to most organic life*."

"They're still using those textbooks?" Mike asked, incredulous. "Goddesses—you'd think they'd update them every decade or so. *Especially* after Shinganshina," he added.

“Decades?” Almost every recruit’s head in the room whipped around towards Mike. The shaggy-haired man groaned, inciting a snicker from Hange.

“How old are you?” Connie asked. “And when did you graduate?”

“Hey, now!” Mike protested. “That’s getting a bit personal, there.”

“You said decades,” Sasha pressed, a grin slowly spreading across her face. “How many, exactly?”

“I’m not telling—”

It quickly turned into a game, a temporary reprieve from the gut-wrenching memories and events on the screen.

“He’s thirty!” Connie yelled, jumping to his feet excitedly.

“Thirty-eight, obviously!” Sasha protested.

“Are you kidding?” Eren grinned, drawn into the game. “He looks twenty-five!”

“Thank you, Jaeger!” Mike exclaimed, throwing his hands into the air in exasperation.

“Idiots,” Levi scoffed. Then, after a moment, he said, “He’s seventy-three, obviously.”

Silence fell on the room, thick and heavy, like the first snowfall of the winter, as the soldiers sat in stunned silence—stunned that the blank-faced *Captain Levi* had made a *joke*. “Eighty-two!” Eld suddenly yelled, jumping to his face, an impish grin spread across his face.

“Not you too!” Mike wailed.

“Seventy-five!”

“Eighty-three!”

“Sixty-nine!”

“He graduated in 760!”

Mike glared at Levi as the others continued hooting and hollering. “I hate you, little man,” he informed him, glare promising torments not even the undiscovered tenth circle of Hell could provide. Levi’s eyes flashed with the ghost of a smirk as he took a sip of tea, pointedly looking away from the chaos behind them.

Two deer were drawn in the shadow of a nearby tree, watching the painted Titan. “*As they lack reproductive organs, it’s unclear how they reproduce. Beyond that, in appearance, their physique resembles the average human male*.”

Most of them. The grin suddenly dropped from Eren’s face. He grimaced, raising his fingers to rub at his temples as a sudden sharp, throbbing pain shot through his skull. Images of inky black hair and tombstone-sized teeth flashed behind his eyelids and h grunted, tips of his fingers pressing the sides of his head firmly.

“Eren?” Mikasa turned to him. “Are you okay?”

“Do I *look*—” He winced again, and the images faded. He frowned, the memory of what he’d seen already fading. “I—” He shook his head, hair flopping about in front of his eyes. “Yeah. Yeah, I think so.”

Hange glanced over, raising an eyebrow as Mikasa continued whispering, evidently unconvinced. *What's going on over there?* they wondered.

Reiner sat up a bit straighter, craning his neck to look over the heads of the Levi Squad. "It's Eren," he told his companions in a barely audible whisper.

"Do you think it's a—" Bertolt glanced around nervously before holding up a finger and tapping his head, furrowing his brow.

"Maybe," Reiner watched as Eren finally shook Mikasa off, turning back to the TV. "It doesn't look like he remembers anything."

"What do you think it was about?" Bertolt asked.

Annie watched the brunet in the front row, face impassive. *I didn't hear anything from just now that could really trigger anything*, she thought. "I don't know," she said. "It could have been anything."

"A past inheritor's memory of being eaten?" Bertolt suggested. "Or his own, maybe? Shifting does take a lot out of—"

"Hey," Reiner hissed. "Don't—" he glanced around, "—say that out loud," he finished, in a tone so low that Annie and Bertolt had to strain to hear him speak.

"*We also know that their body temperature runs quite high*." More steam poured from the Titan's foot as it walked past the two grazing deer. "*And, baffling though it is, their appetite seems geared exclusively to human beings.*"

I wonder why that is, Hange thought, ignoring the scandalized and furious noises the other soldiers around them made. They doodled a tiny Titan in the free corner of a cramped page, drawing a circle on their belly and putting an even tinier person inside. *None of the theories we've had made sense so far*. They turned over their shoulder, glancing at the shelves lining the walls. *There have to be thousands of books in this apartment at least*. They glanced at Omni, wondering whether the blue-haired girl would let them look through the volumes. *Of course she will!* they decided. *After all, they did leave them here, with us. Why would they do that if they didn't want us to read them?*

Mina sat behind Jean and Franz, their attention focused on the man at the front of the classroom. "In fact," the instructor continued, "a Titan's driving principle seems to be this appetite. Given that they've subsisted for over a century without access to their only source of nourishment." Thomas sat next to Franz, frowning as he listened to the lesson. "However, we surmise that these creatures do not, in fact, consume to live." Eren's eyes widened with horror as he absorbed the man's words, realizing what he meant. "Let that sink in. Titans aren't motivated by hunger as such. They're simply in it for the kill."

"That's fucking disgusting." Gunther shook his head, just as horrified at the fact now as he was when he first learned about it.

"They don't even *need* to eat us—or anything, really." Oluo's gaze was dark, voice completely his own, without the snobbish lilt for once. "So why?"

Yes. Hange's gaze flicked back to the bookshelves. *Why?*

Levi glanced at the scientist, furrowing his brow. "What are you—" They shook their head quickly, making a hushing motion. Levi followed their gaze, eyes landing on the bookshelf. He glanced back at them, raising an eyebrow and glancing back at the screen for a second before looking, once again, at them. Their eyes widened comically behind their glasses and they nodded, giving him a quick thumbs-up and beaming.

The instructor lifted his gaze from the book for a moment, glancing over the class, before looking back down. "The terrifying vitality of these creatures is beyond scientific dispute," he read. "We have only to consider events of the recent past to see this. "

A sketch of people standing atop battlements on a castle, firing off rounds at approaching Titans, was shown on screen. "*Mankind has long possessed cannon technology, as you're aware*."

"What in Walls' names are those people wearing?" Moblit stared at the people depicted in the drawing on the screen. He knew that they were just drawings, but there was no *way* anybody could dream up an outfit like that, let alone actually wear it. They had identical hairdos of tightly curled coifs around their heads, tall, cone-shaped hats that easily added two feet to their heat perched on top of them. To top it all off, they were also wearing spiky skirts that seemed to spread out around their waist. "It's ridiculous! You couldn't even *hope* to fight a Titan in that!"

"*But that alone proved tragically insufficient*." Faceless Titans approached the carefully pencilled lines of the castle, arms held out in front of them, thin mouths curved into identical, macabre smiles.

Krista shuddered. *Those fake grins. . . they're almost scarier than their actual faces*.

"*Even with their heads blown to bits, the Titans persist*." The Titan at the front of the parade's head was gone, blown clean off by a cannonball and replaced with a column of smoke and fountain of blood. "*Though there is some variability on this score, a Titan's head usually regenerates within two minutes*."

They don't need brains to function, Armin thought. *So what is it?* He frowned. *Do they even* have *brains? Or*, his eyes widened, lighting up, *maybe their brains—or whatever they have instead of them—are somewhere else!* He frowned, considering the options. *The nape, maybe? Maybe there's an organ in there that controls their regenerative properties!*

"Is that true?" Thomas whispered, frowning.

"As if their size wasn't frightening enough." Franz shuddered.

"Excuse me, sir!" Marco stood, hand shooting into the air as the instructor turned, picking up a piece of chalk. "Are you basically saying that the Titans are immortal?"

"Common misperception," Mike chuckled.

Very nearly. Ymir closed her eyes, supressing a shudder at memories of decades of isolation and darkness.

Not even close. Bertolt looked down at his hands, imaging wrinkles etching themselves into them at lightning speeds, and his skin crumpling into a mess of bloody dust and scattered bones, blown away by the wind.

The instructor finished a rough outline of a human-shaped silhouette on the board. "No, I'm not," he said. "There is," he turned to face the rest of the room, "in fact, one way to ensure death." He turned back to the board, drawing a circle around the back of the Titan's neck. "Strike here," he instructed. "If the back of his neck takes adequate damage, a Titan will not regenerate.

"That, as you may have surmised," the instructor continued, "is where the flesh-paring blades you see here come in." In front of the instructor, on a simple wooden table, where two swords, polished blades gleaming in the pale sunlight coming through the window.

Jean stared at the screen sorrowfully, remembering the rush of excitement he'd first felt when he'd picked them up, and the sense of accomplishment flooding him the first time he whipped around in the air, carving out the wooden nape of a fake Titan, leaning against a tree in the woods. *I never thought there'd be a day I'd* actually *have to use them*.

"A good, deep strike with one of these to a Titan's weak spot, and the monster is left no time to regenerate. They die, and stay dead." He sketched marks into the back of the Titan's neck, drawing out where the flesh of the nape had been cut out.

Eren watched, eyes wide and fixed on the swords and drawing on the board. He turned, glancing at Armin out of the corner of his eye.

Present-day Eren looked over at present-day Armin, frowning at his friend's obvious nervousness. "Look at it this way, Armin," he said. Armin glanced over at him. "It's a golden opportunity. If we prove our worth as soldiers right here, we'll rise up right through the ranks. Before long," he continued, "we could even be leading our own regiment." He turned to look at Armin, grinning despite a bead of nervous sweat on his own temple. "We can bypass rookie status altogether!" He bared his teeth in an excited, only slightly apprehensive, grin.

The officers in the room chuckled, and even the other members of the Levi Squad snickered. Eren flushed. "Well, it's not like I *knew* about the military hierarchy!" he protested.

"Still," Petra giggled. "Your 'own regiment'?"

"I was just looking towards the future!" He groaned as mimics of his words bounced around the room. "Why do I bother?"

Armin started, staring at him for a moment. "Yeah." He grinned back. "Sounds good. I'm with you all the way."

"Now, now, boys," Mina interrupted. "You're not the only ones!" She stood with the rest of the squad, hand on her hip, smirking at them. "Save some of the glory for the rest of us!"

Armin's stomach twisted. He clenched his fists, looking down at his lap. *I could have helped*. He closed his eyes. *They could have* lived*. Stayed with us,* been here right now*, instead of stuck. . . here. Or living out the rest of the rest of their lives in a completely different universe, without any friends or family to fall back on*. He squeezed his eyes shut, tight to the point where it began to hurt. *It's all my—*

"Armin," Mikasa whispered, placing a hand on his shoulder. He jumped, looking at her. "Whatever you're thinking," she said quietly, "stop. Because it's not true."

"Mikasa," he said, "you weren't there. You don't get it—"

"Don't I?" He turned red, snapping his jaw shut as he realized just what he'd said. "It's not our faults," she said, voice duller, subdued. "Okay? And, even if it is. . ." She took a deep breath. "There's nothing we can do about it," she nearly whispered. "What's done is done, and we can't undo the past."

"Good luck beating us to the punch a second time." The corner of Thomas's lip quirked up into a small, challenging smile. "No head starts for you this round!"

"Is that a challenge?" Eren laughed.

"Listen up." The others, now slightly more at ease, turned slightly to look at Thomas as he spoke. "Whoever kills the most Titans gets bragging rights."

"Hah!" Eren chuckled. "Better not fudge your scores!"

"So irresponsible." Oluo sniffed. "They're acting like kids! There's a war going on, for heaven's sake!"

"They *are* kids," Petra countered. "And, besides, you don't act that much different before we go on missions."

"And stop sniffing," Gunther butted in. "You sound like you've got a cold."

"Squadron 34!" Their banter was cut off when a Garrison soldier standing on a nearby roof, his comrade surveying the city through a spyglass, shouted at them. "The vanguard needs support!"

"Right!" Eren turned to glance at his friends over his shoulder. "Give 'em hell!"

"Yeah!" A fanfare of trumpets sounded out the beginning of the familiar battle march as the cadets shouted, pulling out their swords and running across the rooftops.

Unlike the previous times the flourish had played, silence was the only thing that met the music. Everybody was fully, and grimly, aware of what was coming next.

Tiles clattered beneath their feet as they leapt through the air, cables and gears whirring as they shot out their anchors. A trail of gas exploded behind Eren as he shot forwards, leading the charge through the city. He landed running on a rooftop, using a puff of gas to help him leap over an empty street onto the next building before hopping back up into the air and flying towards the Gate with his friends. Mina and Thomas shot past him, alternating between shooting through the air and leaping between roofs. Armin flew after

them, cables whipping around in the air, painting scribbles in the air with the gas trailing behind them.

Eren swerved around a bell tower, landing on a roof and running along the ridge. He gasped at the sight of the flames already consuming the part of the town closest to the Wall, and the monstrous silhouettes looming out of the smoke and embers.

Petra inhaled sharply. "I know that the advance team was wiped out," she said, "and that it took a while for the rest of the force to get there, but. . ."

"They moved so fast," Eld said. "It's insane." Not quite to the extent of Shinganshina, but close.

"It's never like this outside," Oluo muttered.

"There are so many of them!" Mina cried over the rush of wind.

"The vanguard's been completely overwhelmed!" Thomas exclaimed.

"I don't believe this!" Nac shouted. "Those guys always talk so big!"

"If they were in the vanguard, then they were hardly the most formidable group to begin with," Levi said.

Eren's eyes were blazing, teeth gritted. *I thought things would be hairy, but this*. . . He inhaled sharply. *This is insane!* His eyes suddenly shot open, zeroing in on something ahead of them.

Eren's gaze darknened, and Armin flinched, biting his lip. Mikasa's eyes widened as the realization hit her, and she pursed her own lips, looking away. The slow, horrified silence spread across the room as the other soldiers, recruits and veterans alike, registered why the trio in the front were so quiet.

"We've got an Abnormal!" Eren shouted. The long-limbed, blonde-haired Titan perched on the rooftop perked up at the sound of the approaching soldiers and *leapt* over the street, arms and legs splayed out as it threw itself towards them.

Mikasa gasped, eyes widening. "Oh, what the *fuck*?!" Eld threw himself against the back of the couch with a shout.

"I've never seen anything like that!" Hange exclaimed, eyes widening as they sat up in delight. "It jumps! I didn't know they could do that!" They were about to turn and demand more details from the Scouts when Levi nailed them with a sharp kick in the side. Hange grimaced, rubbing their ribs and turning back to the front.

"Hold up!" Eren yelled, cables screeching as he and Armin shot backwards, escaping the Jumping Titan's jaws by mere inches. The tower shook on its foundation as the Titan crashed into it face-first, dust billowing through the air from newly-formed cracks in the walls, and steam rising slowly from the Titan's face.

"That was close!" Petra gasped. "It nearly got you!"

Not us. Eren toyed with his sleeve.

Armin yelped as his knees collided sharply with the roof tiles. He quickly scrambled to his feet, hefting his swords and standing in a crouched, battle-ready position on the roof next to Milieus. Eren hung below them, feet anchored firmly against the wall of the house, next to the window, and gripping the eave above him tightly with one hand. The three stared at the Titan, hearts in their throats, holding their breaths.

"You're making me paranoid just by watching you," Gunther told Eren. "How did you hang there for so long?"

"ODM," he replied.

Slowly, the creature, eyes turned up towards the sky, moved its face, pulling it away from the hard stone of the tower and leaning to the side. The music died off, replaced with Thomas's agonized groans as he lay in the Titan's mouth, head hanging over its lower lip, eyes wide and staring blankly ahead.

You could've heard a pin drop. Krista let out a gasp that was almost a scream, hands flying up to her mouth. "Oh, my god," Jean choked out, staring at the screen, horrified.

"Please," he croaked out, hands shaking as he pushed weakly at the Titan's top lip. "Help me."

"He's alive?" Sasha whispered, face pale. "He—oh, Sina."

The cadets stared, frozen in horror as embers and Thomas's harsh, rattling breaths drifted past them. Eren's eyes widened in horrified fury.

Thomas's eyes widened, and he let out a terrified cry, scrambling at the Titan's mouth as it tipped its head back, throat bulging as it swallowed Thomas whole.

Yells of horror and outrage filled the room.

"It swallowed him!" Connie wailed, leaping to his feet. "It—it swallowed him *whole*!"

"He was *alive*," Jean gaped. "It—" He put a hand to his mouth, stomach suddenly lurching.

"I can't even imagine. . ." Armin's eyes were wide as he stared. Eren glared at the screen, a furious heat flooding him from head to toe.

A gong rang out, an eerie bell melody ringing out as the cadets stared, watching as the Titan slipped from the tower, landing on the ground and ambling slowly away. Eren shook, entire body quaking as he stared after the Titan. "You bastard!" The scream tore its way from his throat, and he let go of the eave, shooting forwards, gas flooding the air behind him.

"No!" Eld yelled.

"Don't fucking do it!" Gunther shouted.

Fuck. Levi stared at the screen, incredulous, as the brunet on screen blasted through the air. *I wondered how he was chomped so quickly.* He frowned. *Guess this explains it*.

"Eren!" Armin yelled after him.

"Wait!" Milieus cried as Eren leapt over a roof spire. "Stay with the group!"

"Listen to them. . ." Sasha groaned, putting her face in her hands.

Erwin narrowed his eyes, watching the scene with cold, cynical eyes and a carefully neutral expression.

Mina and Nac exchanged a quick glance as Armin jumped off the roof, chasing after Armin, then nodded, running off the edge and flying after them, Milieus less than a heartbeat behind.

They followed me, Eren realized, a sick, swooping feeling filling his gut. They *followed* me. He squeezed his eyes shut. *What if I'd stayed? If I'd listened to them?* His heart began pounding faster and he clenched his teeth, nails digging into his palms. *Maybe. . . if I'd just* waited*. . . they'd still be alive*.

"Get back here!" Eren ran over a rooftop, kicking off of a chimney and firing a cable across the street. "You're going to pay for killing my friend!" He nearly grazed the ground as he jumped off, the belts and boxes of his gear shaking from the exertion. "You're not getting away!" He crashed through the branches of a tree, leaves flying everywhere as he burst through the foliage, whizzing wildly over the streets. "*You're not getting away!*"

He's wild, Mike thought. *He doesn't know what he's doing. He's barely even registering his surroundings.* The mustachioed man had survived enough battles to recognize someone enraged beyond reason, into madness—and predict exactly what was going to happen next.

He screamed as he yanked his swords out, raising them above his head as he shot forwards—directly at a dark-haired Titan, standing shock-still next to a rooftop.

He never even saw it coming, Eld thought, hands balling into small fists on his knees.

"I can't watch this," Connie whispered, squeezing his eyes shut. Armin did the same, turning away from the screen, as if he could just will it out of existence, and Eren steeled himself for the sight that was to come.

Blood sprayed through the air as the Titan's head shot up, teeth chomping down over his left leg. Eren didn't even have time to scream as he crashed into a roof, tiles torn up behind him as he was flipped head-over-heels in a series of chaotic somersaults, crashing into and over gables before finally skidding to a halt, arms limp, eyes shut, blood pooling slowly, steadily, turning the tiles beneath him an even deeper shade of red.

Krista's hands flew to her mouth, muffling the horrified scream that tore from her throat. Ymir grimaced, taking the other girl's hand in hers, squeezing tightly. Sasha jumped, grabbing Connie's arm with one hand, Jean's with the other. Annie's gaze sharpened, narrowing her eyes as she watched the screen carefully, face blank.

I should have been there. Mikasa's hand was shaking, covering her mouth, eyes wide with horror. A horribly familiar feeling of dread slowly seeped into her, every inch of her skin turning ice-cold and chilling her to the bone. *I* should have been there*.*

The veterans watched, eyes wide in mixes of shock and horror. "He should be dead," Oluo whispered, voice barely audible. *I've never seen anyone survive less than half of that!*

I can't even imagine *how much that's gotta hurt*. Moblit allowed him a quick glance over his shoulder at the pale-faced brunet.

Do his Titan powers dull the pain, somewhat? Hange wondered. *Or maybe the bite was so intense that it damaged his nervous system?* A shiver ran down their back, a chilling mix of curiousity, trepidation, and delight. *Or is it in his* head*? Does his anger drown out everything around him? And just what will it take to shock him out of it?*

Armin landed on a roof in front of him, whirling around in horror. "Eren!" he screamed.

"Eren!" Nac yelled.

"Oh, god, no!" Mina cried.

The girl suddenly gasped, whipping her head around as another Titan burst out of a side street, snatching Nac clean out of the sky.

Shouts of alarm echoed through the room at the sudden capture of the boy. "Nac!" Sasha screamed, covering her mouth, even though she knew it was no use.

Distracted, she didn't even notice another, flat-faced, large-eyed, Titan reach up, grabbing her cable and tugging it sharply towards itself. She gasped, wind knocked out of her, as she was thrown against a column, back colliding harshly with the stone, and slid to the ground, head drooping to the side as her blades fell from her hands.

More yells rang through the room.

So quick. . . Krista's hand shook as she stared at the unconscious girl. Her head lolled on her shoulders, arms hanging limply at her sides, sending a cold spike through her heart and reminding her, chillingly, of another woman in the same position, in a very different situation.

The Titan leaned over, hands on its knees, head tilted, as it stared at the limp figure on the ground.

Mileus screamed, blades slashing uselessly through the air as he flailed his arms, thrashing about in a grinning, blood-drenched Titan's grip. "Don't!" Armin's eyes were wide, legs shaking, as he teetered on the edge of the roof, carnage and horror surrounding him on all sides. "Please stop! I don't wanna die!"

It's my fault. Tears were welling in Eren's eyes, threatening to break through and flow freely down his face. *They followed me when I ran, and got distracted when I fell*. His hands shook, angry red crescents dug into his palms. *They died, and it's* all my fault*.*

Armin collapsed to his knees, quivering like a leaf in the wind, staring blankly down at the ground. Across the street, Eren's prone form lay, still and lifeless, on the rooftop, left arm dangling limply off the edge. A pool of red surrounded his head, with more streaked down his face, staining his hair, and splattering his jacket. What remained of his left boot was dyed almost completely red, drenching the tile around it with deep crimson.

He lost so much blood. Eld's eyes were wide as he stared at the lake of crimson Eren lay in. *Even for someone with healing powers—how did he survive?!*

***Why?* Armin stared at his friend's body, face blank with horror. *Why?* Mileus wailed as the Titan tightened its grip around his legs, raising him up to its gaping mouth. *My friends are being devoured*. . . Mina's head lolled forwards as the brown-haired Titan opened its mouth wide, holding her up in one tight fist. *And all I can do is watch*.**

"It's not your fault," Eren said, quietly, dully. *If anything, it's* mine.

But that's not true. Armin stared at the screen, not fully seeing what was going on on it. *At least. . . not for all of them. Eren, though. . .* He inhaled shakily, realizing what they were going to see next.

At least Mina was unconscious. Petra thought, tears threatening to pool in her eyes. *Small miracles*.

Levi looked away, tugging at his sleeve. Hange closed their eyes for a moment, taking a deep breath, and Erwin watched, eyes blank and cold.

The ground shook, and Armin's gaze slowly slid to the left. A massive, grey-bearded Titan was marching forwards slowly, dull grey gaze fixed on the boy on the roof. *What's wrong with me?*

He's in shock, Gunther thought. He'd seen it happen countless times, watched more than his fair share of new recruits plucked from the ground after tumbling from their horses and dropped into wide, gaping jaws without even lifting a finger to defend themselves.

The metal boxes of his gear scraped against the roofing tiles as the bearded Titan seized him by the back of his jacket, lifting him into the air like a limp kitten. *Why can't I move?* The Titan held him over his mouth, stiff skin creaking as he opened it wide.

Armin's eyes widened and he yelled as the Titan let go. He screamed as he was dropped into its mouth, scrambling at the slick, wet tongue as he slid into its gullet.

He shouldn't have survived. Reiner watched, eyes narrowed and cold. *No one could survive that*.

***No*. . . Eren's eyes cracked open, staring blankly at nothing. *Armin*.**

"You're still conscious?" Petra breathed, eyes wide. *That's*. . . *horrible*.

"*Eren*." The brilliant green of Eren's eyes were dull as a distant memory clawed at him, whispering at him from the shadows of destruction. "*Eren!*"

"Eren!" Clouds drifted through a pale blue sky, the sun shining down on the Shinganshina riverbank.

"I remember this," Armin said, a small smile tugging at the corner of his mouth.

Eren smiled, too. Memories of warm, sun-soaked days and gentle nights filled his mind—memories from a simpler time, when the closest they got to mortal peril were distant tragedies and the daunting tales they read of in their storybooks. He bit his lip as the sweet, distant reminiscences were shattered by a bolt of golden lightning, jolting them from their seats on the very riverbank bathed in sun on the screen, and a giant, skinless hand gripping the top of the Wall.

A younger Eren sat on the ground, mouth hanging open as he stared blankly up at the sky. "Why are you shouting?" he drawled, barely even moving his head to glance at Armin as the other boy ran up to him, clutching a thick, leather-bound book in his hands.

"What's wrong with you?" Connie asked. "You look. . . I don't know—"

"Lazy?" Jean supplied. "Sedated? Like you just woke up?" It was. . . unnerving, to say the least, to see the boy—normally lively, at best, and a full-on rage monster bouncing off the walls, at worst—looking so bored and lifeless.

Eren shrugged noncommittally. "I guess you'll see," he replied simply, mood dampened, not really feeling like saying anything else.

"Sorry," Armin apologized quickly before holding up the book, showing it to Eren. "I found a book my grandpa keeps hidden away!"

Nice book, Jean thought, *but there's something different about this picture*. He tilted his head, frowning. *Like something's missing*. . .

His eyes widened. *Mikasa! Where is she?* It was a strange sight, to say the least, to see the two boys without the dark-haired girl hovering around them. *Maybe she was sick?* he wondered. *No—she's never gotten sick, not once, during the three years in Cadets. Not during the winter, when everyone else got colds, or the sniffles, at least, and not even that one time everyone in the camp got the fever. She could be running errands—no, she'd never leave Jaeger.* He frowned. *So* where is she*?*

Eren tilted his head just the tiniest bit to the side, glancing at the strange image embroidered in gold on the cover: a blazing sun and wispy clouds hanging over waves that seemed to toss and turn, and curl over each other.

"It's beautiful!" Krista said. "But what are those pictures of?"

Eren and Armin exchanged a quick glance. "Well," Armin said uneasily, "I'm about to say. . ."

"Oh." Krista flushed, embarrassed. "Right. Sorry."

"Oh, no!" Armin waved his hands in front of him. "You've got nothing to be sorry for! Don't worry!" He smiled reassuringly, flinching back a bit when Ymir glared at him over the blonde girl's head.

"Believe it or not, it's about life on the outside!"

There was a brief of second of silence before the room erupted in shouts of shock, amazement, and disbelief.

"Holy cow!" Sasha exclaimed.

"But that's illegal!" Jean cried at the same time.

"What was in it?" Connie asked, excited. "Wait—!" His eyes widened. "This is what you meant, right, Eren? When you said that Armin was the one who showed you all the stuff about what's outside the Walls?" Eren nodded wordlessly.

“Where did your grandfather get that book?” Erwin asked. The din in the room slowly faded away, all eyes turning to the two blonds. Armin shifted under his friends’ and the Commander’s scrutiny.

“I. . . don’t know,” he admitted. “I think it was a family heirloom? I was helping him clean out the attic,” he told them, “and it was on top of a bookshelf, in a box. He let me read it, but told me that I mustn’t ever tell anyone else about it.”

“And you went ahead and did it?” Hange asked, raising an eyebrow, smirking in amusement. “Oh, I don’t mean it as a bad thing!” they said quickly when Armin shrivelled, flushing. “I’m impressed! I didn’t take you for such a mischevious little thing. Reminds me of something I’d do,” they added, grinning widely.

“Is. . . that a good thing?” Armin asked tentatively.

Hange looked at him, surprised, for a moment, before letting out a bark of laughter. “I like you!” they exclaimed, chuckling.

“Thank you?”

Eren’s eyes widened as he turned to face him full-on. “I really hope this is your idea of a joke,” he said. “Stuff about the outside world is illegal. Seriously—you could go to jail for that.”

Or worse. Erwin closed his eyes for a second, tightening his grip on his knee as he composed himself. “Do you still have that book?” he asked, looking at the recruit.

Armin shook his head regretfully. “We had to leave it when we ran,” he said.

“I see.” Erwin nodded, voice carefully measured to hide his disappointment. Levi glanced at him, frowning.

“Trust me!” Armin bounced down to crouch next to Eren, cheeks flushed pink with excitement. “You’d change your mind if you knew what was actually out there! For example,” he said, “according to this book, most of the world is covered with salty water so deep you can’t reach the bottom!” Eren stared at him in disbelief. “It’s called the ‘sea’!”

“That’s impossible!” Sasha gasped. “You can’t have *salty water*!”

“Why—” Eld turned to look at the boys in the front row. “But merchants would’ve scooped it clean!”

Armin shook his head, eyes brighter. “No!” he exclaimed. “It’s amazing—it’s so deep that you can’t even *see* the bottom, let alone touch it!”

“That’s nuts!” Oluo yelped.

“Like,” Eren sat up straight, “salty for real? C’mon, you’re making it up. If something valuable like salt was just floating around underwater, merchant s would’ve taken it by now!”

“The sea.” Eren smiled faintly.

“We’re gonna see it,” Armin said, lips twitching as he recognized the pun. “Right?”

Eren nodded. “Definitely,” he promised. *We* will*,* he promised himself. *No matter at what cost. . . I’m gonna see it before I die*.

“That’s just it!” Armin cried, delighted. “The sea never runs out! It’s that big!”

“Yeah,” Eren chuckled. “Whatever.”

“Just bear with me.” Eren’s eyes widened as he glanced up, gaze fixed on the light in Armin’s eyes. “There’s a lot more than salt.” He opened the book, placing it carefully on the ground in between them. “Water that glows like fire, fields of ice, giant rocks that take days to climb. . .” Pictures had been drawn carefully into the book, showing everything that Armin was talking about, and more. “Imagine how huge the outside world must be!”

“Woah,” Connie whispered, eyes impossibly wide, the images on the screen reflected in his eyes.

“It’s beautiful.” Sasha felt like she’d said that phrase too many times during the past seven episodes, but it really was true. When she was younger, she had seen the forest as a magical, wonderous place. Her eyes had been opened wider when she joined the Cadets and seen the picturesque world inside the Walls. But, now, looking at just the drawings in the book. . . The rolling fields, forested mountains, and massive deserts encircled in the Walls just seemed so *small* and repetitive. *Is this what Eren feels like all the time?* she wondered. *No wonder he’s so desperate to leave. I’ve only known these places exist for less than a minute, and* I’m *ready to tear down the Walls, just to get a glimpse*.

While the others *ooh*ed and *aah*ed, Ymir found her eyes drawn to one image in specific. Long ribbons of light flowed through a starry night sky, tracing brilliant, glowing lights in the air behind it. And, even though the artist hadn’t used any paint in the ancient book, she *knew* that the lights were glowing with countless shades of blue, green, and purple, in a myriad of mystery and beauty. *It’s like that dream I had*, she thought, *when I woke up*. At the time, she’d convinced herself that it had been just that—a dream. There was no way that anything like that could *really* exist (that, and she’d been lying in a sprawling desert of pale white sand, which she distinctly remembered not being there when she woke up the next day). But, now. . .

The sun was beginning to set, the orange sky reflected in the river, shadows creeping closer to the two boys sitting on the bank, bent over the book. “It. . .” Eren stared at the book, eyes full of wonder. “Does sound really neat.”

So that’s why. Mikasa thought.

It’s dangerous, but. . . “The world’s gotta be so big!” Connie said. “It sounds amazing.”

Levi closed his eyes for a second, ghostly sensation of distant sunlight from a far-off memory warming his face with phantom comfort for a moment before he opened his eyes again. “It is,” he said.

“Okay,” Armin looked up, eyes bright, “you’ve got to promise to never tell a soul. But my parents are. . .” He swallowed, cheeks bright. “Uh, well, they’re going to sneak outside the Walls to see for themselves.”

Really? Mike opened his mouth, ready to ask, curiousity clawing him open from the inside out—how could a pair of civilians get outside the Walls? And how would they get over it,

in the first place? He suddenly snapped his jaw shut, swallowing his words before they fell from his mouth. *He lived with his grandfather*, he reminded himself. *And he mentioned his parents, early on. . . said that something happened to them*. He frowned. *There's already been so much devastation this episode; better not bring this up, too*.

"They'll know what it's like first-hand," Eren breathed, eyes bright as he stared down at the images covering the pages of the book.

Maybe they did, Armin thought, looking down at his palm. *But at what cost?* He squeezed his eyes shut, imagining his parents bodies, bloody and torn apart, or, even worse—the two of them sliding down a Titan's gullet, screaming as they clawed at the thick coats of slime and drowning, muffled by the thick, heavy heat inside a Titan's stomach. He clenched his teeth. *Was it really worth it?*

"Look at me," Armin said. Eren looked up, confused. "We could do it ourselves one day," Armin said. "We can have adventures like the guy who wrote this."

Blazing green eyes opened, sparkling in the brilliant sunlight. A chorus of a thousand voices rang out as Eren forced himself to his knees, arm shaking as he pushed himself off the roof.

His willpower is astounding, Moblit thought, awed. *Most people would've given up—heck, most people would've been dead five minutes ago. But the mere sound of his friend's screams were enough to drag him back from death's door*. For a second, Moblit felt a brief flash of fear—just what else would Eren use his strength for? Fighting until his legs gave out and collapsed beneath him? Running until his body just simply gave up? Or, the most terrifying thought of all: turning on the people around him, to protect himself and the people closest to him?

He quickly shook his head, clearing the doubts from his mind. *Don't be ridiculous*, he chided himself. *You're too paranoid. Eren's on humanity's side. Or, at least, the side of the Scouts. That's been made abundantly clear*.

Armin screamed, voice echoing in the bearded Titan's cavernous mouth as he scrambled at the slimy tongue.

A hand suddenly reached out, grabbing Armin's wrist. Armin gasped, eyes widening at the sight of Eren, drenched in blood, gripping onto the Titan's massive front teeth with one hand, lone foot pressed against its lower teeth, forcing its mouth open.

"How did you *get* there?!" Sasha gasped.

"I don't remember," Eren said. "Everything—well, everything from—from Thomas—" he took a deep breath, "Everything from Thomas to. . . I don't know, waking in front of Woermann? It's all a blur. But I must have used my ODM, somehow, he reasoned."

Tears were mixed with saliva on Armin's face as he stared at his friend. Eren grit his teeth, letting out a roar as he tugged fiercely on Armin's arm, wrenching him out of the

Titan's mouth and throwing him out, onto the rooftop below. Armin shouted as he landed, tiles flying up around him. "Eren!" he shouted, scrambling up.

Eren had lodged himself between the Titan's teeth, right foot pressing down on the bottom ones, a blade pressed between the two front one above.

Bertolt couldn't help wincing, remembering how close the razor-sharp blades had been to tearing through his nape, and imagining them pressed between his own teeth, digging into his gums.

"I refuse to die like this, understand?" he breathed. A growl echoed from within the Titan's throat and the metal of Eren's blade creaked.

"It won't hold forever," Levi muttered. "He's gotta get out of there. It's now or never."

"Armin, listen," Eren forced out, voice ragged. "We're still going to the outside world." His left hand, stained with blood and bruises, shook as he held it up, reaching towards Armin. His eyes widened as he leaned forwards, reaching for his friend. "The things you told me about," he gasped. "I have to see them. I have to!"

"Stop giving your fucking speeches!" Sasha shouted, nails bitten to the quick. "Just—fucking go! *Jump!*"

Armin's eyes widened, tears flowing down his cheeks. "Eren!" he screamed, scrambling forwards, thrusting his own hand out. "No!"

"Run, you idiots!" Connie screeched.

The bearded Titan's teeth snapped shut with a sickening *crash*, splattering Armin with blood as Eren's left arm spiralled out, bitten clean off his body.

Mikasa's entire body stiffened, an electric jolt spiking through her, blood draining from her face. She turned to look at Eren's arm—still firmly attached to the rest of his body. Eren's jaw was tight, grinding his teeth as he stared at the screen, face pale.

Annie closed her eyes, glancing to the side. Ymir took a deep breath, ignoring the silent tears dripping from Krista's eyes onto her arm.

A gong rang out, and Armin stared, horrorstruck, at the Titan as it tilted its head back, swallowing. Armin screamed, a gut-wrenching, heart-stopping scream that echoed above the spires and rooftops of the town into the sky. Tears flowed down his face as he wailed, eyes wild in pain and grief.

Nearly everyone in the room winced, Armin's wail of grief striking through their hearts, sending waves of cold running down their backs.

To lose someone like that, and know that you were responsible. . . Eld looked at the boy from the corner of his eye. *Even if he came back. . . I can't imagine the guilt he must feel*. He looked at the other people on his couch, wondering how he would feel if one of them died on his watch. Just imagining it made his chest hurt and stomach twist, and he clutched his shirt, tightening his grip on the fabric to the point where his knuckles turned white.

A massive, dark cloud drifted through the sky, casting a thick black shadow over the town. On the other side of Trost, Mikasa froze, turning to look back behind her, a cold breeze tossing her hair and scarf about as the last vestiges of sunlight were blocked out, nothing in the air but dust and ashes.

Episode – 6: The World the Girl Saw: The Struggle for Trost, Part 2

"Hey!" A blurry face appeared out of the black haze. "Wake up!" Bleary eyes focused on Connie's furrowed brow and panicked expression.

"Did the Titans ignore him?" Petra frowned.

"That would be a first," Eld muttered, furrowing his brow. "Weird."

"Armin!" Armin's eyes were blank, wide with shock, as he stared ahead unseeingly. "Can you hear me?" Connie shook his shoulders harshly. "Come on! Armin!" Connie's face, drenched with sweat, faded in and out of focus, looming over Armin. "Armin! Come on!"

He must have passed out, Mike reasoned. *Hardly an unusual reaction. Did the Titans leave him for dead?*

Armin let out a small gasp, eyes finally focusing as he managed to blink himself back into the present. "Are you awake?" Connie asked. "Are you okay?" Five other cadets stood on guard around them, tense, coiled forms casting shadows int the weak grey sunlight straining through the heavy grey clouds. "Where's your squad?"

Connie grimaced. *Did I have to ask?* He felt like kicking himself. *For once, I should have listened to Ymir.* He opened his mouth, ready to apologize, before faltering, spotting the stricken look on Armin's face.

"Squad?" Armin's voice was faint, as if he had forgotten the meaning of the word.

Armin flinched at the weak frailty in his own voice. *God, I'm pathetic*. His fingers pressed almost painfully into his own skin as he looked away, gripping his forearm. He flinched, turning away, when he found himself facing Eren, instead. *He didn't die*, Armin thought, looking down at his feet. *But that's not the point. He thought he would, and I thought he did*. He tugged at a loose thread on his shirt, biting his lip and fighting back the burn behind his eyes. *I'm useless*.

Mikasa shifted subtly away from the screen, moving one hand to rest on top of his. He glanced up at her and, imperceptibly, without meeting his eyes, she shook her head.

"All right," Connie said carefully, voice low, "get it together. Why are you alone?" He pulled his hand away from his shoulder, furrowing his brow as he stared down at it. "Why are you so damn slimy?" he asked, flexing his fingers.

"You damn moron," Jean muttered, nearly whispered. Connie flushed with indignance but didn't respond, mutely accepting Sasha's offering of an apple and taking a bite.

Armin's eyes were wide, lifelessly dull, as Connie kept talking, casually unaware of the effect his words had on the blonde boy. "What happened?"

Armin suddenly gasped. A rushing noise roared through his head as the memory of what had happened flashed through his mind, horribly vivid and intense. Every drop of blood and scream of a comrade was replayed in horrible detail, ripping and tearing at the fragile corners of his battered mind.

Krista nearly leapt out of her seat at the sudden flux of colour and sound, grabbing Ymir's hand. Bertolt inhaled sharply, twitching, and Annie flinched, head jerking, twisting away by a fraction on an inch.

"It's like a nightmare," Sasha couldn't help whispering aloud, though only Connie and Jean heard her. She had had more than her fair share of her own since the Battle of Trost, but none quite so intense as the. . . *things* they had just seen on screen.

"A daymare?" Connie offered, a weak attempt at a joke.

Armin turned red, digging his fingers into the couch cushion. "Hey," Moblit said quietly, noticing his expression. "Don't worry. You're not the only one."

That got the boy's attention. "What?"

"There are plenty of people who get those," Moblit said, voice low and soothing. "Flashbacks. Trauma. It's common in the military. We risk death every time we leave the Walls, it'd be a miracle if we always got away fine. I don't know what it's called," he said apologetically, "but I once heard someone in the capital call it 'dysphoria.' What I'm trying to say is. . ." he paused, scratching the back of his neck awkwardly when he realized a good half of the recruits were hanging onto his every word. "Uh, you're not alone." He nodded awkwardly, dropping his hand and drumming the plush carpet with his fingers. Hange grinned faintly and nudged him comradely with their elbow.

You're not alone. The words bounced around in Eren's head and he turned back, frowning at the screen. *But that's not true, is it?* He pursed his lips. *Because there's nobody else like me. I'm the only one. No one else knows what it's like*. . . he grimaced, temple throbbing. *Right?*

Connie stumbled back with a gasp as Armin screamed, hands flying up to grab at his hair. "I'm worthless!" he screeched, fingers twisting in his stiff, filthy locks, pulling at them with such force that more than a few were pulled up by their roots. "Why can't I just die!"

Sasha flinched at Armin's screams and Krista bit her lip, vision blurring as tears welled in her eyes. Eren's heart sank and he looked away, unable to meet Armin's eyes—not that he could have, as the other boy was staring fixatedly at the ground, face as red as a tomato.

"Hey," Connie ran forwards, "calm down." He held a hand out hesitantly, unsure of what to do. Tears ran down Armin's face as he shook his head, screaming through clenched teeth.

"Enough!" Armin stiffened, eyes widening. "Let it go, Connie." Connie looked up at the sound of the cool, smooth voice directed at him. "Aside from him," Ymir said, back turned to the others, hands tucked in her pockets, "they're all dead."

"That was harsh," Krista whispered.

"What would you have had me do?" Ymir muttered. "We were in the middle of Titan territory. We didn't have time for dramatics."

"He just saw his best friend die," Krista protested quietly. "He was in shock."

“Better he be sad than dead, don’t you think?” Ymir replied icily, not meeting her eyes.

“Shut up!” Connie shouted, fists shaking. “Armin didn’t say that.”

Ymir glanced over her shoulder, the picture of indifferent calm. “Take a look around you,” she said, “isn’t it obvious? We can’t waste any more time here with him. We’ve got to move on.”

She’s cold, Erwin thought. *One might even call her ruthless*. He frowned. *She’s calm, impossibly so, and she’s speaking like a seasoned veteran. She acts like she’s had years of experience.* He furrowed his brow, remembering what little the girl had said about her past. *But what threats could she have faced inside a Wallist church? It just doesn’t make sense*.

“Why would the Titans ignore Armin?” Connie asked, gesturing at the shaking, snivelling boy crouched at his feet.

“I don’t know,” Ymir replied, sounding almost bored. “Maybe they thought he was already dead or something.” She turned a bit more, tilting her head as she regarded the sobbing boy on the tiles. “It was unfortunate that they encountered Titans.” Armin’s entire body was shaking, a steady river of tears running down his cheeks, eyes unseeing. “I can’t say much about Eren and his squadron if only Armin survived.”

“You—!” Eren leapt out of his seat, familiar sea of rage boiling up to his ears. “How the hell could you even say that?” he roared, clenching his fists. “You saw what happened, nobody could have predicted that!”

“I didn’t say *that*.” Ymir’s voice was cool, unbothered, but she didn’t quite meet Eren’s eyes when she crossed her arms, focusing on a region closer to his left eyebrow. “But you saw what happened, just like we all did.” She shrugged, glancing away at the patch of blank wall behind his ear. “They died. And they didn’t exactly go down fighting, did they?”

“Eren, stop,” Armin whispered, cutting Eren off before he could launch into another tirade. “It’s not worth it, okay? It already happened, and there’s nothing we can do about it.”

“Can’t you hear her?” Eren protested. “She’s—”

Not wrong. Jean flinched as the thought flew threw his mind. *But it’s true*.

“You’ve said too much,” Connie snarled, rage slowly pooling onto his features as he clenched his fists. “I’m going to make you shut your mouth!”

“Both of you stop it right now!” Krista rushed between them, throwing her arms out in front of Ymir. “We’re all in a state of shock,” she said beseechingly. “We saw our friends being killed like animals.” Tears pricked the corners of her eyes but she powered on, voice steady. “You can’t help it!”

She stumbled a bit as Ymir threw an arm over her shoulders. “That’s my Krista,” she crooned, nuzzling her hair. “When this battle is over, you’ve *got* to marry me!” She laughed loudly, forcefully, as Krista stared in shock.

“She sure is light-hearted,” Oluo muttered.

"I don't think she is, really," Petra whispered back. "She's obviously forcing her laughter—I think she's just trying to get rid of the tension."

"What, by adding more?" Gunther asked. "I mean, not that I don't appreciate her effort, but brushing off their dead friends isn't really the best thing to do in this situation."

Eld shook his head. "I don't know," he said. "But don't you think that, even if she is just trying to lighten the mood, she's still acting too familiarly?"

"What do you mean?" Petra asked, glancing over her shoulder to make sure no one was listening.

"She's acting like this is commonplace," Eld said. "And, yeah, they said that cadets have died during training, but *still*. It's like she's already fought a dozen battles and seen death on the battlefield."

"It's for certain," Connie muttered, looking away. "She's messing around more than usual." He turned back to Armin, crouching in front of him. "Whatever the case," he told him, "we have to move." He held his hand out. "Can you stand up, Armin?"

That's a surprise. From what Hange had seen of the boy and his joking, devil-may-care attitude both on screen and in real life, they'd expected him to be, in a life-or-death situation, crass and frantic, not gentle and reassuring (though, admittedly, a bit blunder-y). *Does he have siblings?* they wondered, making a tiny note in the corner of the cramped page dedicated to the recruits. *He certainly acts like he's used to calming people down*.

The sight of the hand held out towards him seemed to shock Armin into lucidity. He looked away and stood up, taking a deep breath. "Sorry to be a nuisance," he said quietly ignoring Connie's look of alarm. "I'll rendezvous with the rear guard."

You're not, Eld wanted to say. *God, don't every say that*. He winced. *I'd probably have a better chance trying to convince a wolf to stop eating meat*.

Gunther glanced at him, a small furrow between his brows, at his sigh. "What?" he asked.

"Nothing," Eld muttered, rubbing his face. "Just—Rose, these *kids*."

"They're only a few years younger than us," said Gunther.

"Like that makes it better." Eld pressed the heels of his hands into his eyes. "They're *kids*, and they've already outfought *veterans*. One of them's practically a living weapon, too. Sina, how did this happen?"

Gunther could only shrug helplessly. "I dunno," he said. "I really don't know."

"Hey. . ." Connie watched as he approached the edge of the roof. "Armin!"

Armin leapt off the edge and shot out a cable, leaving a trail of gas behind him as he swung away, low enough that he could have grazed the ground.

Levi glanced at the couch in the front row, noting, as he did so, that he wasn't the only one. "He fell pretty far before using his gear," Mike muttered.

Levi made himself shrug, turning his focus back to the TV. “Not like you haven’t seen it before,” he replied in an undertone. “And you heard the kid shouting earlier. He thinks he’s worthless. He might as well be waving a giant sign saying ‘I’ve got a death wish’ over his head.”

Connie watched him leave, frowning. “Connie, let’s go!” He glanced back towards the others. “We’ve been given orders to advance!” Connie cast a final glance after Armin before turning and walking back to his squad.

A choir sang a slow, mournful melody as Armin flew over the streets, looking down at the blood and gore splattered on the grey stone below. *This is hell*. His eyes were wide, the images seeming to jerk by in slow-motion as he took it in.

Still in shock. Hange noted the way the images moved, as if his eyes were taking things in faster than his mind could process.

***No. The world hasn’t gone to hell. I’ve just had it wrong the whole time*. His teeth were clenched, eyes shadowed by the horrors of the world around him. *This world has always been hell*.**

More than a few people in the room twitched at the words. Mikasa clutched the end of her scarf, running a finger over the comfort of worn wool, tucking her chin in and burying herself in the familiar scent.

More than you could ever imagine. Annie reached up, fingering the shape of the silver ring through the rough fabric of her breast pocket.

Memories of being kicked down and beaten by the bullies in his old neighbourhood flashed through his mind. *Strength preys on weakness*.

“I don’t get why they keep showing us the same two things,” Levi muttered. “This doesn’t have anything to do with Titans or the war. In fact, why show us this personal shit in the first place?”

“There’s benefits to knowing each other,” Moblit offered. “It helps, doesn’t it? On the battlefield, I mean,” he added.

“There’s benefits to knowing *certain bits* of each other,” Levi corrected with a small scowl. “My squad know how I fight, how I like my tea, and how many laps I can run before I start to stink. But they don’t know what my favourite shirt is, how I shit, or what weird-ass dreams I had last night.”

“Well, we’re all here,” Mike offered. “There’s got to be some reason.”

“What does this Bobby expect us to do, defeat the Titans using the power of friendship?” Levi said snidely. “Does Rob think we’re all going to hold hands and sing a song about loving an accepting each other to turn the enemy into steaming little piles of shit?”

Erwin shook his head. “That’s definitely not it,” he said. “But think about it—that’s a kitchen back there, we have bedrooms upstairs, and we’re taking regular, frequent breaks.

We're obviously meant to stay here for quite a while. Whatever's going on in this web Isayama's spinning, this is obviously stuff we need to know."

"I can't even begin to imagine what Easy-yeah-man's trying to do," Levi muttered, leaning back. *Whatever it is, I just wish we didn't have to focus on this part for so* long.

The younger Armin curled up on the ground, drawing his knees to his chest and wrapping his arms around his head to protect himself from the bigger boys while his grandfather's book lay to the side, cover battered, spine bent, tossed away and open on the ground. *It's so simple to understand*.

Armin grit his teeth, embarrassed fury overlaying and mixing with the already overwhelming memories of shame and soul-crushing worthlessness. *Why do they keep showing this?* He clenched his knees, fingers turning white. *Why do we need to see this over and over again?*

***But my friends. . .* Younger versions of Eren and Mikasa ran down an alley, fists clenched, glaring the glares of two people on a mission. Echoing thuds rang through the air as Eren punched one boy in the jaw and Mikasa seized another and threw him forcefully into a wall. *They wanted to be strong*. Armin knelt on the ground, eyes and mouth wide as Eren grappled with the other boys. *They've saved me*.**

"We'll always be there for you," Eren vowed. He frowned, looking at the other boy when he didn't respond. Armin hands were fisted tightly in the fabric of his pants, eyes fixed deliberately on the coffee table, away from anyone else's gaze. *Armin?*

Armin looked up to see Eren, holding a hand out, and Mikasa watching him, expressions of pity etched into their faces.

From this point of view, it looks like they're patronizing him, Sasha thought. She shifted uneasily in her seat, glancing away. It felt wrong, to be able to hear Armin's deepest thoughts, thoughts she had no doubt he'd never wanted anyone to know about. She loved her friends, but this felt almost like they were violating his privacy. *And not just him—we've seen so much shit, and it hasn't even been ten episodes, yet*.

Is that how he saw us? Mikasa couldn't supress the tiny burst of alarm in her at the look of superficial, condescending pity etched onto her younger features. *Is that how he* sees *us?*

***And I couldn't stand it*.**

Eren's eyes widened in poorly concealed shock. Armin seemed to shrivel where he sat.

The image shook, blurring. *As far as they're concerned, I'm someone they have to protect.* Tears rolled down Armin's face as he looked up at them. *Just like them, I wanted to be strong and live my life beside them.*

"Armin. . ." Mikasa trailed off helplessly. *You* are *strong*, she wanted to say. *You're brave, you're an amazing friend, and you're the smartest person I've ever met*. She wanted to grab him by the shoulders and shake him. *You're funny, you're clever, and it's only because of*

you that we're still alive today. She wanted to hug him and shout and scream and even cry, just to get the words through his thick skull.

But she didn't. She bit her lips so hard that they turned white and looked down, quiet as a mouse.

An anchor clattered against a wall and bounced off. Armin shouted as he crashed into it and fell to the ground, landing in a heap on the sidewalk.

Petra went through the now-familiar motions of glancing at the boy despite knowing full-well he was fine. "That was a big fall," she muttered.

His shoulders shook as he grabbed his leg, tears running down his face as he squeezed his eyes shut.

He hurt that leg—well, both of them—in the omelette incident, too, Hange thought, smirking a bit at the memory of the episode despite the somber mood of the room. *It's a miracle he hasn't suffered any permanent damage*.

But look what ended up happening. **He let out a small sob.** ***Eren died because of me.***

"That's not—!" Eren began.

"Eren, please, I don't want to talk about it," Armin muttered, head down. "Just—"

"No!" Armin jumped at the sudden shout. "Armin, listen to me—"

"Oh, look!" Sasha said loudly, grabbing a bowl from the coffee table and scurrying back to her seat. "Pears!"

"Tea, Petra?" Eld offered at the top of his lungs.

"Eat a fucking cracker," Levi told Erwin.

"Armin," Eren said, lowering his voice until only Armin and Mikasa could hear him in the room's newfound din. "Listen. It wasn't your fault—no, don't talk, I know what you're going to say. Just *listen*." He grabbed Armin's shoulder and stared into his eyes, vibrant, blazing green meeting alarmed sky-blue. "Armin. *I* chose to jump into the Titan's mouth. You didn't make me. And the only reason you ended up in there anyways was because *I* was reckless and charged into battle without thinking ahead. If anything, you should blame *me*."

"Eren—" Armin protested.

"I'm not done!" Eren's eyes flashed. "Armin—there's *nothing* that would have stopped me from going there, you hear me? I could have lost *both* my legs, had my arms cut off, a sword sticking through my face, even! But I still would have tried my damned hardest to getting there and saving you. You're my friend, Armin, and I will *always* come back for you. You're so smart—so why can't you get this into your head? It—" he shook Armin by the shoulders, "*wasn't*—" another shake, "your—" another shake, "fault. God, Armin, can't you get that?"

"I—" Armin took a deep, shuddering breath. "I was too weak. I couldn't fight back. Not then, not even at home. You saw that, on the TV! I've never been like you or Mikasa—"

"And thank Rose for that!" Eren exclaimed. "Armin, we *need* you. Mikasa and I, we don't *think*. We just run in and start punching. Mikasa's lucky, she's strong, at least. Me, I just get

beaten to a pulp. You're the one who always comes up with the genius plan that saves our asses, Armin. Big muscles aren't the most important things in life, got that? And," he lowered his voice even more, so much so that it became no more audible than the sneeze of a fruitfly to even Mikasa, "Armin, you've been saving me since before cadets, even since before we met Mikasa."

Armin's eyes widened and he jerked back, staring at his friend in stunned shock. "What?"

"I—" Eren glanced up and around at the other soldiers, noticing them shooting them sneaky glances out of the corners of their eyes amidst their conversations, which were slowly growing less and less enthusiastic. "I'll tell you later, okay? But, Armin—" he gripped his shoulder, "I know that you still blame yourself. That's just how you are. But, just. . ." he trailed off, wetting his lips. "Don't?" he suggested weakly. "Just—you can talk to me, okay? Like Moblit said, you're not alone. Sina, that sounds cheesy."

"Seriously?" Armin giggled weakly. "*Everything* you say sounds cheesy."

"Dick," Eren laughed.

Armin's eyes suddenly flew open as he heard a panting, wheezing noise, and sobs that weren't his. He looked up, over his shoulder, too see Hannah frantically pressing down on Franz's unmoving chest.

The noise in the room suddenly fell flat, an all-too-familiar somber, horrified silence blanketing the soldiers. "Franz," Krista gasped quietly.

Armin stood and walked over to her as she pressed her mouth to his, desperately pushing breath into his lungs.

I don't see any other bodies, Gunther noticed. *But there's no one else there. So that means*. . . A weight like a twisted snake settled in his gut. *How much do you have to love someone,* he wondered*, to abandon all hope for your own life just to stay with them?*

"Hannah," said Armin quietly, watching as she went back to pushing down on his chest, tears carving a river down her face. "What are you. . ." His eyes drifted down to Franz's lower torso, at the torn edge of his shirt, so darkened with blood that it almost looked black, and at the nothing beneath it.

"Oh, my god," Jean turned around, a hand flying up to slap over his mouth. He gripped Marco's arm with his other hand, knuckles white. Marco grabbed it, his own hand quivering.

"He's fine," he whispered, voice steady despite the shivers running through his body. "He's fine, he's fine." He repeated the words like a mantra, fingers wrapped tightly around Jean's.

"She stayed with him," Jean managed to cough out. "He— She—it's so obvious that he's dead! Dead as a fucking doorknob," he nearly spat. "But she—Rose, she's a fucking moron!" His grip on Marco's hand tightened and he grit his teeth, squeezing his eyes shut.

"They're fine," Marco muttered. "They're both fine, they—"

“It doesn’t matter where they are now,” Jean bit through clenched teeth. “They both died, didn’t they? They might be together, but they’re never gonna be able to see the Walls again, or their family, or their homes—their *real* homes—or. . . or. . . or *us*. God!” He ripped his hand away from Marco and ran them both through his hair, fingers shaking. “Shit,” he cursed under his breath. “Shit, shit, *shit!*”

“We had them marked down as MIA, didn’t we?” Connie said quietly, voice wavering. “Hey.” He made a small, choked-off, almost hysterical noise in the back of his throat. “We had *all* of them marked down as MIA. Wasn’t that stupid of us?” He took in a shuddering breath, voice quivering in a near-chuckle. “Isn’t our job so much easier now?” he asked, voice shaking. “We know what—we know what happened to them—" Sasha grabbed him and tugged him close to her, squeezing her eyes shut as she pressed him against her in a tight, crushing hug, effectively cutting him off.

“Oh, god, Armin!” she sobbed, looking up at him. “Help me, please! Franz stopped breathing!” Armin’s eyes were wide as he stared down at Franz’s pallid, lifeless face. “He won’t respond to CPR!”

“Is she in denial, or what?” Ymir muttered, voice low, incredulous, and, somehow, almost enraged. “How is that—” She cut herself off with a growl, tousling her hair and glaring at the screen through a curtain of tangled brown strands. Krista was silent, hand drifting up to rest lightly over the older girl’s.

“Hannah, please,” Armin begged. “It’s not safe here.”

“No!” Armin started at Hannah’s shout. “I’m not leaving him here!”

“He doesn’t even have *legs* anymore.” Levi’s face was blank, but his hands told a different story: fists clenched, short, blunted nails digging into his palms, knuckles whiter than the pristine marble counters behind them. *His eyes were closed*, he noted, almost as an afterthought. His *eyes were open*. . . He nearly flinched outright, confining his urge to squeeze his eyes shut into a short blink, glancing at the patch of sky visible on the corner of the screen, mentally beating back memories of another cloudy day and man severed at the waist with a stick. He shook his head imperceptibly, chasing away the evocation with an even bigger stick.

“Are you alright?” Erwin’s lips barely move, the words a mere mutter carried by his breath.

Levi scowled. “Since when do you ask that?” he retorted. “Just watch the stupid fucking show.”

“You really don’t understand, do you?” Armin whispered, a fresh bout of tears breaking free and rolling down his face. “Franz is. . .” His voice broke and he stood, helpless, watching Hannah desperately try to pump life back into the legless torso.

This is just pathetic, Reiner thought with a small grimace. “This is pitiful,” he whispered aloud, keeping his eyes fixed coolly on the screen.

“Huh?” Bertolt glanced at him—it had been ages since any of them had last spoken, and he’d fallen into the steady pattern of routine flinches and silence.

“Nothing.” Reiner shook his head.

Armin held a hand to his face, shaking. “Please stop,” he begged in a quivering whisper.

Tragic, Hange thought absent-mindedly, running their finger down the edge of their page.

Hannah ignored Armin, leaning forwards to press her mouth to Franz’s again, tears staining the collar of his shirt. “I can’t take it.” Hannah’s panting and Armin’s quiet sobs punctuated the somber silence of the heavy grey clouds and dark, looming shadows. “I can’t take this anymore.”

Shouts and hollers of anger and protest filled the air.

“What’s this?” Oluo asked.

Gunther rolled his eyes. “Maybe if you wait half a second, we’ll find out,” he said, elbowing him good-naturedly.

A crowd of what must have been dozens bottled around the Gate, waving their fists and yelling at a fat, bald man standing in front of them.

“Oh.” Mikasa’s expression grew, if possible, even darker.

Eren glanced at her. “He’s that guy you chased off, right?” She nodded.

“That man looks familiar,” Krista said with a small frown.

“He should,” Moblit said. “That’s Dimo Reeves.”

“Who?” Sasha frowned.

“Bald, fat, walking ball of cash and sweat,” Jean listed. “Absolute dickhead, capitalist, probably smells like shit and flowers. Need I go on?”

“How do you know that?” Connie asked. “Have you met him?”

“*No*.” Jean rolled his eyes. “We’ve seen him before, remember? He was one of those asshole merchants from back when Wall Maria fell.”

A dark-haired man was thrown back, collapsing into the arms of a light-haired one. “Hey!” the light-haired man yelled. “Don’t you know what’s going on here?”

“What is he doing?” Petra frowned. Eld shrugged.

Oluo scoffed loudly. “Oh, so when *she* asks, you don’t—"

“Just bleed out already,” Gunther groaned, shoving Oluo’s flailing limbs away from his face.

“I know!” Dimo Reeves whirled around, levelling a hand and cold glare at the crowd. Two burly henchmen stood next to him, showing the crowd their fists, and, behind them, being pushed by four other men, was a massive cart, wider almost than the Gate itself and

piled with a bundle of enough good to feed a small village for a year. "That's why things are like how they are! If you all want to live, help me!"

"A *cart*?!" The room was in uproar. "What the fuck is wrong with him?" Eren threw his hands into the room, flying to his feet. "Is his head screwed on backwards or something? He's gonna risk the Walls for a fucking *cart*?"

"And such a big one, too!" Petra's face was as red as her hair. "It obviously can't even *fit* through the door—at least let the people through, first!"

"This is ridiculous," said Annie, looking away from the screen.

"What a piece of shit," Levi sneered. "Fucking pigs."

"Walls, he's dumb," Mike agreed, shaking his head.

"Pig," Levi reiterated.

There was an instant uproar. "What's wrong with you?" someone screamed.

"This isn't a joke!"

"We're higher priority!"

"We're gonna get eaten!" a woman wailed.

"And to make it worse, they're making so much *noise*," Eld groaned. "If they didn't have the Titans' attention before, they sure do now."

"Do something, soldier!" a man shouted as a dark-haired man in the Garrison's uniform was shoved forwards. "Make him move that damn wagon!"

"I—" the man stuttered. "I'm not exactly sure. . ."

"Who let him join?" Ymir scoffed. "What a limp noodle."

"Take your best shot, little man." Reeves turned to glare at him, eyes dark and furious. "I'm the president of this town's merchant guild."

"This is infuriating." Eld rolled his eyes.

"Uh—!" The soldier took a step back, sweat beading on his forehead as Reeves stepped up to him.

"How's the limpdick even standing up?" said a scornful Jean. "'Cause it sure as hell isn't with a spine."

Spine. Eren's right eyelid twitched and he blinked forcefully, wrinkling his nose as his mouth filled, suddenly and unexpectedly, with a sour, rancid taste, as if he'd just bitten into a chunk of meat left out for far too long. *Spine*. . . He leaned forwards, grabbing his cup of grape juice (which tasted nothing like grapes) from where he'd left it on the table and took a quick gulp, swallowing forcefully and licking the leftover drops off his lips.

Fluid?

"Who do you think pays all the bills for the food for the soldiers?" Reeves demanded. "Or maybe you've got some finances tucked away to fund the racket you call a job?" Spittle flecked the soldiers face as Reeves spat at him.

"Oh, my *god*." Connie grabbed the skin of his face, pulling down. "*That's* what he's focused on right now? Not the fucking *man-eating giants*?"

"He's got to be stupid, right?" Sasha asked incredulously. "That's got to be the only explanation. He's stupid. He's got something knocked loose in there. There's no way anyone can be *that* blind. No way in hell money is that big of a motivator."

"This is insane." Gunther shook his head.

"Now shut up and push!" Reeves hollered. "This cargo is worth more than all you people make in your whole lives! There's a reward in it if you help!"

"None of them will *have* lives if you keep being such a fuckwit," Levi snarled.

"Don't worry, sweetheart." An ashy-haired woman knelt in front of a little girl, hugging her close to her chest as the crowd raged and screamed around them. "Daddy's going to use those big cannons to help to defeat those Titans."

"He didn't even let the children through?" Petra looked beyond incense, chest swelling with unbridled outrage. "How can someone be so selfish?"

The little girl looked up from her mother's shoulder, blinking as she stared down the street. "Mummy," she said, pointing. "Look."

"Oh, no," Sasha whispered. *Please, please, please*, she begged every god and spirit she could think of, even sending a couple mental prayers to the goblins and pixies of her childhood bedtime stories. *Please, don't make us watch her die*. She wanted to squeeze her eyes shut, but found she couldn't tear her gaze away from the screen.

A horrified silence, punctuated only by quiet gasps and whimpers, fell over the crowd. Unbroken panes of glass in windows and pebbles on the ground rattled and shuddered as loud, earth-shaking footsteps echoed down the street. The little girl's mother's eyes widened as she looked over her shoulder.

Of course. Ymir kept her face carefully expressionless as Krista's hand tightened in hers.

A soldier stood at the end of the street, taking slow, shaky footsteps forwards, arms limp, and straining, as if he would keel over from the strain of the mere act of standing up. A loud crash tore through the near-silence as a Titan, a good head taller than the buildings on either side of the street, skidded into view, sending bricks and rubble flying.

People jumped in their seats throughout the room, grabbing at their friends and chests at the sudden noise and movement. "It came out of nowhere!" Sasha cried.

"Holy shit!" Jean exclaimed, Sasha and Connie clinging to one of his arms, the other one closed tight around Marco's wrist. "It's like—shit, it's like it just *appeared*, or something!"

"We didn't even hear it!" Connie squeaked. "What, do Titans have sneak attacks, or something?"

"Or something, I hope," Sasha groaned.

The soldier was thrown aside like a paper doll as the Titan charged down the street, rolls of fat jiggling. It ran like a demon plucked straight from one's deepest nightmares,

elbows pressed tightly to its side and forearms flailing, knees locked together as it swivelled towards the humans—all while moving faster than a herd of stampeding horses.

"Look at the way it's moving!" Hange nearly squealed. "Draw, Moblit, draw!" they commanded, smacking the XO's arm.

"Yeah, but how's it moving so fast?" Eld blustered. "I mean, just look!" He demonstrated by locking his own knees and wiggling his legs back and forth. "What, are its joints backwards too, or something?" Hange made a small noise of delight. Levi groaned.

The civillians screamed, surging towards the Wall. Reeves let out a blubbering, choked-off noise of horror as he flailed backwards. "Push, damnit!" he roared. "Push if you want to live!"

"And he's still thinking about the damn cart!" Petra exploded. "What a *dick*!"

The wails of panic were deafening as the waves of people ran at the cart, pressing themselves against it. People were trampled underfoot or crushed between other people as the hundreds of civilians shoved the massive breadth of the goods with both their own and others' body weights. Some people even tried to climb over it, scrabbling at the ropes and wooden sides of the wagon. All the while, the Titan continued running at them, torso swaying side to side, like a doll being waved about like an enthusiastic child, the great on its blank face open, tongue lolling out.

"They're being crushed," Eren said, voice hushed in horror. He could almost feel the phantom force of hundreds of pounds on his chest, crushing his lungs and pressing him into the ground, bones creaking and groaning as they were bent slowly, agonizing out of place, flattened and weighed down by forests worth of timber and deposits of stone. He could nearly *smell* the crushed, splintered wood and musty earth beneath the streets, feel the layers of chalky stone dust settling on his face and in his hair, the slivers of wood pricking deep into his flesh. *Almost like I've felt it before*.

The familiar puffs of gas hissed as three Garrison soldiers shot after it, swerving and twisting about in the air as they chased the speedy behemoth. "Why's the son of a bitch ignoring us?" a dark-haired, pallid man demanded.

"It's an Abnormal!" a young man, tan skin a sickly, panicked grey, yelled back. "Stop trying to figure it out!"

"He's too fast!" a woman with eyes the colour of a murky swamp, hair flapping wildly around her face, cried. "There's no way we'll get to him!"

"We won't make it!" the first man shouted.

"We're gonna have to watch them die, aren't we?" Connie asked morosely.

"No." Jean shook his head. "Don't you remember what Mikasa said?"

"What?" Sasha asked.

"She scared Reeves off, remember?"

"So?" Connie asked blankly.

“Are you—” Jean slumped, dropping his face into his hands. “Whatever,” he said into his palms, voice muffled. “Just—just watch. You—” He groaned, scrubbing his hands over his face. “Just watch.”

The soldiers suddenly gasped and coughed as a stream of gas flew by them, just barely catching a flash of inky black hair and a blood-red scarf.

Cheers erupted through the room at the familiar sight. “Get that bitch!” Gunther hollered.

She really is fast. Levi narrowed his eyes, following the movements of the flash of light and shadows that was the girl.

“*Oh*!” Connie exclaimed. “She saves them! Why didn’t you just tell us?” He directed the last part of his question towards Jean. The long-faced boy nearly screamed, slapping his hands over his face.

Mikasa swung into the air behind the Titan, rocketing high into the air above it. An anchor lodged itself squarely in the centre of the back of the Titan’s neck and shot forwards, cables and wind screeching around her as she drew back her blades and, with a mighty shout, swung them forwards, sending blood flying through the air as she sliced the nape clean out.

The roars were deafening. “Alright!” Armin cheered, punching the air. Bertolt shivered, running a hand over the hairs prickling on the back of his neck.

“Go Mikasa!” Sasha whooped.

“Not bad,” Oluo sniffed. “Though a few more lessons would hardly be—”

“Just bite it off next time,” Gunther sighed.

She hurried in too quick, Erwin observed. *At that angle, it’s lucky that her blades didn’t come flying out. Still, it’s easy to see why she’s gathered so much praise: she’s a natural. I’d assumed her skills or attitude would change in the field, but it looks like I was wrong*. Almost out of habit, his gaze flicked down the man on his right.

“That was amazing!” Krista exclaimed, stars practically shooting from her eyes. Ymir scowled.

“I was too hasty.” Mikasa didn’t look fazed by the praise, keeping a critical gaze fixed on the screen. “My blades were blunted. I’ll need to do better next time.”

“Holy hell.” Jean ran a hand through his hair, shaking his head in bemusement. “*That’s* what you got from there?

“Mikasa, you took down an Abnormal, not even a full day out of training!” Petra cried.

Mikasa shrugged. “It could have been better,” she repeated.

“Jeez.” Connie shook his head. “I’m half-convinced she’s just showing off at this point.”

I guess some things are just inherent, Eren thought, glancing at Mikasa out of the corner of his eye. *Even Shadis called her a genius. It just comes easier to her*. Even so, he still couldn’t tamp down the bubble of jealousy welling up inside him, pressing his lungs against his ribs.

The civilians cried out in fear as the shadow of the massive beast loomed over them, swaying.

For a moment, Armin stiffened, half-convinced that the Titan was going to fall onto the crowd.

The ground shook as the Titan fell onto its front, clouds of dust exploding into the air. Mikasa stood, standing on top of the Titan's head of close-cropped brown hair, wiping the dust away from her face with the back of her hand.

Another round of clapping circled the room. "That's epic," Connie said. "That. You." He waved at the screen. "Standing there. That's awesome."

She held up her sword, regarding the dulled, chipped edges of her blade with cool, unaffected eyes.

It's almost mechanical, how she moves, Hange thought, idly adding a note to the ever-growing bubble under Mikasa's name. *Perfect movements and award-worthy strikes every single time. It's like she doesn't even know what fear or failure are*. They frowned at the thought and drew a small star next to the note, circling it.

She blinked, realizing the almost eerie silence and looked up, staring at the crowd. The crowd stared back, eyes and mouths wide in collective shock. "What are you all doing?" Mikasa asked.

Reeves, at the centre of the donut of people, back pressed to his precious cart, let out a loud, relieved bark of laughter. "Good timing!" he roared. He threw his arms to the side, gesturing at the hordes of people. "Make these morons push my wagon!" He punched the air to emphasize his point. "I'll pay you handsomely!"

"Does he seriously think he can get *Mikasa* of all people will help him with this?" Connie demanded, jaw slack with shock. "I mean. . . Seriously, how thick can you get?"

"Thicker than you," Jean countered, knocking his knuckles against the other boy's skull. "'Sides, he probably thinks he *can*. He doesn't even know who she is."

"Does he really want to risk it?" Sasha asked, baffled. "I mean, he just saw her take down an Abnormal on her own."

"Maybe he wants her to join his shitty security team," Jean snorted. Marco snorted into his fist.

Mikasa's eyes were wide, mouth hanging open in quiet shock, as she stared at the scene before her.

Oh, he's done it. Never in his entire life, not even when he'd found her tied up on the ground in a cold log cabin, or when he approached her, both of them still dripping in blood that wasn't their own, afterwards, had Eren seen Mikasa with an expression like that on her face before.

Metal clanked as she raised her sword, pointing behind her. "Right now," she said, voice terrifyingly calm, "my comrades are dying back there." The look of cold horror on her

face was something unlike anything she'd ever worn; her face was pale, lips parted and quivering, eyes dark and shadowed with the cruelty of the world and war she'd been fighting. "I can't help your crisis," said she. "They're dying from fighting Titans."

Reeves hesitated for a moment before drawing himself up again. "Exactly!" he shouted over the heads of the people around him. "It's your duty as a soldier to die for the survival of the citizens!"

Mikasa had to physically restrain Eren from leaping to his feet and putting his fist through the screen. "Fuck you!" Jean roared, leaping to his feet.

"What the hell does *he* know about *duty*?" Mike spat, normally calm visage splitting with rage.

"He doesn't even deserve to say the word," Levi hissed, nails digging into the couch beneath him and tearing grooves in the fabric of the cover.

"Go to hell, you dick!" Sasha yelled, grabbing a handful of crackers and hurling it at the screen.

Armin yelped, ducking, as they bounced off the screen and clattered to the ground, carpet, couches, and coffee table. "Sasha!" he complained, shaking crumbs off his hands.

"Don't get high up on yourselves because of the safety we had for the past hundred years!" Reeves shouted, clenching his fists.

"Really?" Ymir sneered. "'Cause, if I recall, you were, two seconds ago, just a blubbering mess of money-obsessed jelly, shitting your pants in a corner."

"Seriously." Gunther nodded. "You'd think *he's* the one who just took down the Titan."

Mikasa closed her mouth, face relaxing into an expressionless mask. She almost would have looked calm, were it not for the cold darkness, unseeing and unfeeling, terrifying in a way that the threat of a Titan just wasn't, in her eyes.

A shiver ran down Petra's spine and she rubbed her arms, despite the pleasant warmth of the room. *She looks*. . . She searched her mind for the right word. Terrifying? No, not even close. Murderous? No, too calm. Petrifying? No. . . *Deadly*.

She leapt from the Titan's steaming corpse and landed lightly on the ground in front of the citizens. They parted, whispering anxiously to each other as she passed through them, blades held limply by her sides. "I wonder if they understand the value of one person dying for the sake of someone else?" she wondered quietly, eyes both glazed and unfocused and sharp as a blade—a stark contrast to the rest of her pale, almost tranquil, face.

Does she? Jean frowned at the screen then glanced at the girl in the first row.

Mikasa raised her voice. "At times, the death of one is necessary to save many."

No way. Connie stiffened, eyes widening. *Is she gonna—?*

Reeves' henchmen, realizing what she meant, ran in front of their boss, holding up their fists threateningly. "D—" Reeves' eyes widened as he, too, caught on. "Don't you even dare!" He took a shaky, panicked step back. "Your commander and I are old friends!"

"What is he, blind?" Ymir muttered. "Like that'll stop her."

Mikasa kept walking, face blank, as if she hadn't even heard him. "One word from me and you'll be court-martialled!"

"And how's a corpse gonna talk?" Levi asked, lip curling. Mikasa twitched a bit, then scowled.

The two henchmen ran forwards as Reeves shouted, raising their fists to swing at the girl. Metal flashed and the two men shouted in pain, collapsing to the ground, clutching the backs of their necks where the blunt edges of Mikasa's swords had struck them.

"She just took down a *Titan*," Gunther said. "An *Abnormal*. Did they really think they'd be able to stop her?"

"Money makes people think lots of things," Eld muttered. "I mean, just look at Reeves."

Mikasa stopped in front of Reeves, looming over the stout, cowering man. "How will a dead body speak?" she wondered, eyes cold and void.

Mike raised an eyebrow and Hange glanced at Levi, eyes wide. "Rose, that's creepy," Moblit muttered. The dark-haired man scowled, wrinkling his nose.

Reeves let out a wail of horror and threw his hands up in front of his face as Mikasa raised her sword and swung down.

Mike frowned, leaning forwards slightly. Krista gasped, squeezing her eyes shut and gripping Ymir's arm. Reiner peered at the screen, eyes narrowed. Sasha just barely resisted slapping her hands over her eyes. *She's not really, gonna do it, is she?*

"Wait!" Reeves stiffened, drenched in sweat. The blade froze, the edge glinting in the weak grey sunlight, but a hair away from his neck. Mikasa regarded him icily, sword held out in front of her.

That's close. Jean's heart was thudding, eyes wide. *That's really, really close*. He gulped. *She really was gonna kill him, then*. He glanced at the couch in front of the TV. Mikasa had her eyes fixed stonily on the screen, face impassive and cold. There was a small furrow between Armin's brows, but, had it not been for that, he wouldn't have even looked bothered. Eren, on the other hand, had his chin tilted up, glaring at the screen and around the room, as if daring anyone to speak out.

Even back then, during the training exercise. . . Connie shifted uneasily in his seat. *She was ready to kill that thief. Annie, too*, he realized, glancing to the side. He started. The recruits in the back were focused on the screen with almost hawklike intensity, eyes sharp and focused, faces steely and analytical. *Huh?*

"S—" The last remaining henchman stood next to Reeves, stiff with fear, staring at the sword that hovered a breath away from the other man's throat. "Sir. . ."

Reeves took a slow, shuddering breath in, Adam's apple bobbing dangerously close to the point of the sword. "Pull the damn wagon out," he said quietly.

Sasha chuckled weakly. "That's one way to scare him off," she joked feebly, putting on a brave attempt at a smile. And, after a moment's pause, "It *was* just to scare him off, right?" Mikasa didn't respond, not even sparing Sasha half a glance. A chill traced its way down her back and she gulped.

The rattling of the wagon wheels was drowned out by the relieved chatter and sobs of the civilians as it was pulled out, the horses trotting backwards and the wood of the cart scraping against the stone of the tunnel wall. Mikasa stood by the Titan's steaming corpse, watching as the civilians flooded through the Gate in a steady river.

"Thank you, miss!" She turned to the side at the call. The little girl who had first spotted the Titan stood to the side, staring up at Mikasa with wide, adoring eyes.

Petra felt her stomach plummet. She'd seen those kinds of eyes before. She'd *had* those kinds of eyes before. She knew all too well the feeling of admiration and hero-worship that were no doubt flying through her. *Too young to have been trapped in a battlezone*. She glanced at the recruits sitting around her. *Far, far too young*.

"Thanks to you," the girl's mother said, hands on her shoulders, "we'll live." Relief and gratefulness flooded every word, and she smiled, bowing her head respectfully. "We're forever grateful."

Mikasa's eyes widened by a fraction, surprise at the recognition etched into her face. She turned towards them and, after sheathing her blades, raised her fists and saluted. The little girl's eyes widened and she gasped in delight, staring after Mikasa in awe as she walked away.

I wonder how she's doing, Mikasa suddenly found herself thinking. *Is she even alive?* She hadn't known her name, had barely acknowledged her in the moment, and hadn't even said anything to her, but the TV served as a good reminder. *I wonder if I'll ever see her again*. . .

Drops of water landed on the dry, dusty cobblestone with small *pitter patters*, and, soon, the ground was three shades darker, the rain pounding a steady beat against the earth and whatever roofs remained intact. The white steam, hissing from the cold rain, rose into the air, dissipating into the inky grey clouds that loomed overhead.

"That's a lot of steam from one Titan," Connie said.

"Must be the rain," said Jean. "I guess Titan steam reacts to water the same way normal steam does." He wrinkled his nose at the sight of the shrivelled, charred corpse on screen, and the way steam seemed to burst from the skin with every raindrop. *Is all of that just vaporized Titan?* He suddenly felt filthy all over, inside and out, skin and lungs itching at the thought of the steam dissipating into the air and being washed right back into the earth by the rain. *We were breathing that shit in for* days*!* "Sina's tits, that's gross," he nearly retched.

Sasha shot him a hurt look, cheesy crackers filling her mouth and hands.

"Good work, Ackerman," Ian said. "I'm impressed."

"Thank you." The pair stood on a roof, the blackened, sizzling body vaporizing beneath them. "However," Mikasa said, looking down at the swords in her hands, "I attacked to hastily. My blades are dull, now." They clattered as she let them go, tumbling, first onto the drenched red tiles, then onto the street below, clangs ringing through the air as they crashed against each other and the pavement. "I'll do better next time."

"You *actually* said that?" Gunther spluttered.

"Does *anything* faze her?" Oluo demanded. "I mean," he said quickly, ruffling his hair haughtily, "not that that *was* faze-worthy. Me, I could have done that in half the time—"

"Oh, would you can it already?" Petra snapped. "The Captain doesn't act like that, and we all saw you in the Ilse episode, anyways."

"H—hey!" Oluo squawked, flushing as Levi rolled his eyes and the recruits sniggered. "I don't—Petra!"

Ian swivelled around to stare at her in shock. "What on earth have you had to live through to be so nonchalant?" he asked, eyes wide.

My question exactly. Jean frowned.

Mikasa looked up, dark, waterlogged strands of hair hanging over and plastered to her face. "I mean. . ." he quickly looked away, "forget it."

Nothing good, then, Sasha deduced. She knit her brows, glancing at the front of the room.

Mikasa turned away too, hooking a finger in the drenched red scarf and pulling it over her mouth and nose. A bright image of the mother and daughter, in vibrant colour, light shining around them, appeared on screen, followed, in quick succession, by two more, in muted tones of sepia and black and white: a little girl, clearly a younger Mikasa, sitting next to a dark-haired woman—her spitting image—at a table in a log cabin, and a man with scruffy blonde hair and a small, patchy beard, leaning against a window and peeling an onion.

Eren stiffened and Armin's eyes widened in surprise. "Are those your parents?" Connie asked, cheerfully oblivious to the tension slowly seeping out of the trio at the front of the room. Jean elbowed him, glowering, despite the questions piling up at the end of his own tongue.

"Is that your mother?" Krista asked, ignoring the sickening feeling in her gut, as if her stomach were twisting itself up in knots while doing a series of backflips. "You look a lot like her. She's beautiful," she added. Ymir raised an eyebrow at the barely-detectable strain in her voice.

It looks. . . Petra tilted her head, looking at the images of the young girl and her parents. *Homey's the only word that comes to mind. And she looks so happy, and carefree.* The child on screen looked nothing like the young woman she would become; her eyes were shining happily, face splitting from the wide grin stretched across her face, bright enough to light up the whole

room—a far cry from the poker-faced soldier with the cold grey eyes. *She lived with the Jaegers*, Petra remembered, stomach swooping as countless different possibilities and scenarios began flitting through her mind, from abandonment to illness to being trampled by a stampede of raging bulls, each one worse than the last. *What happened?*

The images vanished as suddenly as they had appeared. Mikasa's eyes were bright, lids drooping, nearly shut, as she stared at the tiles beneath her feet. *Why do I have to suddenly think of you now?*

Levi narrowed his eyes. *And why does it matter?*

Currently Available Information

Superhard Steel, Part 1.

A blade, disconnected from its handle, appeared on the screen against a backdrop of tight rolls of thin metal. Next to this was a small image of a Titan's foot, the Achilles tendon cut through. Over all of this was another blade, curved into nearly a full crescent and splattered with blood.

***With its combination of strength and flexibility, this material can penetrate Titan flesh. The "half-bladed swords" are effective anti-Titan weapons*.**

"How did they figure that out?" Armin wondered, breaking the heavy silence in the room and glancing at Mikasa.

"Trial and error, I guess." Eld shrugged. "Just like everything else."

"Ah, well, you've got to give the original inventors *some* credit!" said Hange. "Apparently, they used to make 'em out of iron bamboo!"

"Iron bamboo?" Connie wrinkled his nose. "What's that?"

"It's a plant," Moblit explained quickly before Hange could launch into a speech. "It absorbs the metallic qualities in the ground and, er, turns hard. *Really* hard." Reiner glanced at Bertolt. Annie ignored his gaze.

"So it's a wooden sword," Ymir drawled.

"A really strong wooden sword!" Hange chirped.

Superhard Steel, Part 2.

Tall smokestacks rose above sooty, tiled roofs, smoke curling out of them and into the sky. In the corner of the screen was a diagram of a furnace, with arrows showing where raw ore and material where thrown in, along with something else, helpfully labelled *?*

The factory town's blast furnaces are required for refining superhard steel. As such, only the factory town can produce it.

"The factory town? Where's that?" Jean asked. "I've never heard of it."

"Yeah, you wouldn't have," Gunther said. "It's in Wall Rose—that's where they make all the weapons for the military. You know, ODM, cannons, that stuff."

"They've got really tough security, apparently," Oluo added. "I mean, they wouldn't want any civilians to get mixed up with all that—"

"So they're like really fancy blacksmiths?" Sasha asked, ignoring Oluo's spluttering.

"Mhm." Hange nodded. "Oh, what I'd give to take just one look into those beautiful, beautiful factories," they sighed. "Oh!" They suddenly perked up, eyes widening. "You!" They whirled around, pointing at Marco. "There's books here, yes?"

"Uh. . ." He blinked, then slowly pointed at the bookshelves lining the walls. "Yes. But you're not allowed to look at them!" he added quickly, spotting the manic light flashing in their eyes. "They're about other universes, most of them! It'd risk the walls between the worlds breaking—"

Hange was not deterred. "What about the ones about *our* universe?" they asked, leaning forwards, eyes gleaming predatorily. "We can read those, right? That's safe?"

Marco was starting to sweat, leaning against the back of the couch. "That's not my jurisdiction. . ?" He glanced at Omni for help, only to find that she was, once again, asleep. "I'm really, *really* sorry," he said, glancing nervously up at them. "But I don't think I can let you—"

"Oh, well!" They plopped back into their seat, tossing a few strands of hair over their shoulder. "That's fine, then." Marco blinked, perturbed by their sudden change in attitude.

"You're gonna get them later, aren't you?" Levi muttered under his breath.

"What, are you gonna stop me?" Hange grinned impishly.

Levi rolled his eyes. "Not if you grab me an extra copy." Hange squealed gleefully, making as if to throw their arms around me. "Don't fucking touch me! You stink!"

It's still raining, but this new scene is clearly nowhere near the streets of Trost.

Jean frowned. *This isn't Trost*, he thought.

"This isn't Trost," said Oluo.

"I know it's not Trost," Petra said.

"It could be Trost," said Connie.

"It's not Trost," said Moblit.

"Why would we leave Trost?" Gunther asked. "We were right in the middle of the Battle. Of Trost," he added.

"And where is it, if it isn't Trost?" asked Sasha.

I think I know. Armin glanced to the side.

The rain falls through the needles of the thick evergreen forest, drumming a steady *pitter-patter* against the dirt and tall grasses. Up a small slope sits a tiny log cabin, shutters pulled tightly shut against the storm, raindrops rolling down the slanted roof.

Mikasa inhaled sharply, stiffening. Eren's eyes flicked between her and the screen, recognition and realization creeping slowly onto his face.

"A cabin?" Sasha asked, flummoxed. "Why are we looking at a cabin? What's in it?"

“Secret Titan weapons?” Connie suggested.

“Don’t be stupid,” Jean admonished. “Why would Titans need weapons?”

“No!” Connie protested. “I mean, Titans *as* weapons.” Bertolt did a full-body flinch. Eren furrowed his brow.

“That doesn’t even make sense!” Jean threw his hands into the air. “And why would they keep them in a *cabin*, of all places?”

“Oh! Oh!” Sasha gasped. “Is it the Survey Corps? They could be, you know, staying in the cabin to get away from the rain! And this is when they find out about the battle!”

“Good guess, kid,” Mike chuckled. “But, nah. I’ve never seen that cabin in my life.”

“Here’s something,” Levi said sarcastically. “Why don’t you all shut the fuck up so we can actually find out?” Mike snorted. Mikasa stiffened.

The inside of the cabin is simplistic, nearly barren: a dresser in one corner, a chipped, empty jug sitting on top of it; a simple washbucket on the other end of the room, dented and tarnished; a simple stove of metal sheets, soot-stained and scorched; and, at the very centre of the room, next to a window, a table, around which sat three people.

“Oh,” Krista breathed in quiet realization. *It’s*. . .

“I’m finished.” The little girl in the simple pink dress turned and smiled as she held out a scrap of embroidered fabric to the woman next to her. “What do you think, Mother?”

“Mikasa?” Connie squawked.

“Aw!” Sasha gasped. “You’re so cute!” She frowned when she was met with silence. “Mikasa—?” Her eyes widened at the sight of the other girl. Mikasa’s teeth were clenched so hard that Sasha feared she would break them, staring down at the carpet with wide, panicked eyes. Eren didn’t look much better, staring at the screen in shock, face alternating between red, white, and the occasional shade of green. “Mikasa?”

“Oh, Mikasa!” Mrs. Ackerman smiled warmly, taking the fabric and looking down at the patterns stitched into it. “It’s absolutely fantastic!” She smiled proudly at her. “Excellent work!” Mikasa beamed. “We’ve kept this style of embroidery a family tradition for many generations,” Mrs. Ackerman told her daughter. “When you have children of your own, you must teach it to them.”

Reiner ran through a list of the Asian counties in his head as he glanced, first at the tiny patterns in the little square of fabric, then at Mrs. Ackerman’s face. “Hizuru, I’d guess,” he said to Annie and Bertolt in an undertone.

“Looks like it,” Annie confirmed.

“Do you think she remembers?” Bertolt asked quietly.

“Does she look a hundred years old to you?” Annie snarked.

“If you mean do you think her parents told her, then I don’t think so,” Reiner said. “Either that, or she just didn’t tell Mikasa. I mean, judging from the way things are going, I think it’s safe to assume that she’s dead.”

“How do we know Mikasa doesn’t know?” Bertolt asked.

“Because Eren would be all up in everyone’s face about it,” Annie said bitterly. “Look at them. He’s obviously her host. There’s no way she’d keep it from him. No.” She shook her head. “I don’t think she knew.”

Mikasa blinked, staring up at her in wide-eyed confusion. “How do I get children?” she asked.

Connie couldn’t help the loud snort that escaped him, and he clapped his hands over his mouth, turning red, as everyone turned to stare at him. “Sorry,” he squeaked. “Sorry, sorry.”

“God, she’s so innocent.” Sasha’s shoulders shook as she giggled with Connie, a fist shoved over her mouth to stifle the sounds. “It’s adorable.”

Eld shook his head as they turned away. “You’re smiling,” Gunther drawled, grinning.

“Am not,” Eld retorted in a low voice, mocking Gunther’s sing-song tone. Gunther snorted, elbowing him in the ribs.

“Well,” Mrs. Ackerman laughed breezily, “why don’t you ask your father?” A blonde-haired man leaned against the wall by the window, peeling a potato. At these words, he started, fumbling his knife and nearly finding himself with nine fingers rather than ten.

Moblit couldn’t help chuckling at the poor man’s plight, despite the growing feeling of unease that told him that something was about to go horribly, horribly wrong.

“Well, Daddy?” Mikasa asked, pouting in bewilderment.

“Oh, she is too precious,” Petra whispered, heart sinking when she realised that that was about to change.

“I’m not so sure either,” Mr. Ackerman chuckled weakly, a bead of nervous sweat on his temple. Mikasa’s face fell and she stared at him desolately, unimpressed.

Mikasa’s eyes were squeezed shut, her nails digging painfully into her knees through her pants, the words spoken on screen bouncing around in her head. Voices she hadn’t heard in five years. Words that had haunted her nightmares and floated around the back of her mind since that day. Moments she had prayed nightly she would never have to relive again.

The world is a cruel, cruel bitch.

“But you know,” Mr. Ackerman said quickly, “Dr. Jaeger’s scheduled to pay us a visit, so you can ask him.” Mrs. Ackerman turned to the side, giggling at her husband’s plight.

Hange opened their mouth to ask about Dr. Jaeger, but was interrupted by Jean pointing to something at the back of the room on screen. “What’s that?” he asked.

Behind Mrs. Ackerman and Mikasa was a shelf, something of a nook, built into the wall. On it was a large brass bell, and, next to it, some strange sort of decoration. It looked like a wheel, or a disk, carved from stone and sitting on a stand of carved wooden rods, arranged and attached to each other neatly, looking somewhat like a small, square boat. Behind it, on the wall, hung what almost looked like a small square tapestry of small circles of colourful fabric, delicately embroidered with—

“Japa-knees!” Krista exclaimed, then clapped her hands over her mouth, just as Connie had done, looking embarrassed.

“What?” Ymir stared at her.

“I just—” Krista flushed as she lowered her hands. “Sorry,” she whispered. “But the symbols embroidered onto that tapestry thing—” She pointed, and everyone followed her fingers. “They kind of look like Japa-knees letters, don’t you think? You know, like the ones on the TV and that poster in the hallway.”

“Huh,” Jean muttered. “How about that.”

A silence fell, and, for a moment, all that was shown on screen was the door, looming, almost threateningly, out of the wall, the dim, foreboding shadows of the cabin darkening every groove and dip in the wood. Two knocks rang out, like cracks of a gunshot in the heavy silence.

A chill washed over Krista and she tightened her grip on Ymir’s hand, gooseflesh prickling on her arms. *It’s. . . foreboding*, she thought. *Scary*.

“Ah!” Mr. Ackerman exclaimed. “Speak of the devil!” Two more knocks rang out. “Coming!” Mr. Ackerman called.

Mikasa didn’t react, save for the faintest twitch of a finger, but her eyes told the only story they needed to know—they were wide and haunted, fixed unseeingly on the screen, a million miles away.

It’s the murder, Levi thought. *It’s got to be*.

The rain was loud, almost thunderous, outside the cabin. Two figures stood under the eaves of the cabin, cloaks wrapped tightly around them, nearly pressing against the walls to get away from the flood from above.

“That was. . . sudden,” Gunther muttered, almost afraid to make any noise too loud. “What just happened?”

“Scene change, I think,” Eld muttered back. “But why. . ?”

“No clue,” Gunther murmured.

“Mikasa?” the little boy asked, testing the word out in his mouth.

“Eren,” Petra said, recognizing the little boy at once. She frowned. *There’s something not right with this picture*. . .

Ymir frowned at the screen. *What’s that he’s wearing?*

They’re about to meet. Jean couldn’t help but feel a flare of the old jealousy flicker back to life in his chest as he watched the scene play out. *What did he do when they first met that made her stick with him for so long?* He resisted the urge to cross his arms and sulk like a child because, no matter his feelings, there was definitely more to this part of the story than that. *The rain, the atmosphere, even the music. . . and, of course, there’s how those two reacted*. He glanced at the two in question. *There’s just something that feels* wrong *about everything*.

He's got that fire in his eyes, Erwin noted. *Armin's definitely told him about the outside world at this point. But there's something off*. He frowned. He didn't know what it was. He didn't like not knowing.

Dr. Jaeger, about to knock again, lowered his hand, looking at his son. "Yes," he said. "A girl who's about your age." He turned to face him. "Try to get along, okay? There aren't that many children around here."

That must have been lonely, Sasha thought. *Is that why she only ever sticks with Armin and Eren? 'Cause she's just not used to having so many people around her?* She shook her head. *No, that can't be it. It's more like she just doesn't trust us*. She frowned. *But why?* She hoped that what they were about to see would, at the very least, help them understand the mysterious girl better.

Eren lowered his head, tucking his chin into the folds of the red scarf bundled tightly around his neck. "That depends if she's nice to me," he grumbled.

That's it! Petra nearly shouted. *The scarf!* Wrapped snugly around Eren's neck was a thick woolen scarf of deepest red—the same scarf that was now thrown around Mikasa's neck, the same scarf that she had worn in almost every single moment of the episodes up to this point. *Why's he got it?* she wondered. *Was it his originally? Did he give it to her? Why? Or did she get another one that looked just like it?*

"Eren," Grisha chided with a long-suffering sigh. "It's because of that attitude that you don't have any friends."

"Harsh," Ymir muttered. "And doesn't he have Blondie at this point?"

He frowned, turning back to the door. "Are they not home?"

"But we just saw them. . ." Sasha trailed off, eyes widening. *Oh, Sina, no*.

"Mr. Ackerman! It's Dr. Jaeger!" He knocked again, and the view changed. Blood splattered the walls inside of the cabin, bright, brilliant crimson sinking into the damp, splintered wood and staining the rusted metal hinges.

Krista's hands flew up to cover her mouth, eyes wide, heart pounding in her chest. Mikasa looked away slowly, staring at the ground with a look of lost shock on her face. "Oh, my Walls," Petra whispered from behind her hands, shaking.

"What the fuck." Jean's eyes were wide, mouth open in horror. "What the *fuck*."

The door creaked open slowly and Grisha peered through, frowning. "Is anyone here?" His eyes widened at the sight inside with a small gasp of horror.

Eren stared up at him, confused. "What's wrong?" he asked.

Grisha didn't respond. His mouth was agape, eyes the size of dinner plates, and, as they watched, a bead of sweat ran down the side of his face. "Father?"

The blood thrown across the windows painted an almost mesmerizing picture, patches of red splattered against the sky, rainwater running down the other side in rivulets and rivers. The

floorboards creaked as Grisha knelt down slowly next to a limp body with black hair in a bloodstained blue sweater.

"No!" More than half the room's occupants jumped at the shout that broke the silence. Eren had vaulted to his feet, face contorted with rage. "No—turn it the fuck off! We don't need to see this!"

"Eren—" Eld began, but was cut off.

"This isn't for you to fucking watch!" Eren roared. Eld stared up at him, jaw slack with shock and indignation. "This—" He grabbed at his hair, tugging furiously, eyes ablaze. "Turn it *off!*" His voice rose to a bellow.

"What the hell is wrong with you?" Ymir demanded. Eren rounded on her, eyes bugging out of his skull in his crazed fury. "This isn't about you, for once, so sit the fuck down and stop shouting—"

"Are you fucking stupid?" Eren hollered. "Are you—It's *her!*" He threw his arm out at Mikasa as he yelled. She flinched, clouded eyes clearing as she looked away, fists clenched at her sides. "This is her past, we don't have the fucking right to watch it, *especially* this part—!"

"Well, then, it's her decision to make, then." Ymir shrugged, seemingly nonplussed by the ball of fury looming over her.

"There shouldn't *be* a decision!" Eren raged. "We're gonna skip it, and that's—"

"What? Final?" Levi cut in, eyes flashing like chips of flint as he glared up at Eren. "That's not your decision to make."

"And who's is it?" he shot back, tempered only slightly by the threat of authority. "Yours?"

"Watch it, brat," Levi hissed. "In case you've been too caught up in your own damn drama, we apparently need to know these things. If you and Ackerman are bothered by it, you can go to some other room—"

"*Bothered?*" Eren hollered. Petra gasped, and Gunther paled. "You're talking about making her watch her parents be murdered!" Krista flinched full-bodily, and Sasha gasped quietly. "You're talking about letting them watch—" He clamped his mouth shut, face slowly colouring with what could have been anger, embarrassment, shame, or a mix of all three.

"Maybe," Levi said, voice level despite the very obvious threat in his gaze, "she can speak up for herself."

"She doesn't *need* to!" Eren yelled. He continued his tirade, ignoring the shocked looks being pointed at him. "It's fucking obvious, we shouldn't watch this—"

"You were a lot calmer about Shinganshina."

Eren froze in place, grinding his teeth. "That was different," he finally ground out. "This doesn't even have anything to do with Titans, it's *personal*. We can skip it—!"

“So you want to skip this part to protect her privacy,” Levi said, raising his voice to drown out Eren’s. “But you seemed happy to sit there and watch other people’s lives play out. Or does that rule only apply to who you decide it does?”

“Weren’t you the one who said you didn’t like personal shit?” Eren finally hissed. “Well, tada! We can skip this part. Captain,” he added, forcing the words out through his teeth.

“Are you trying to convince me to kick your teeth in?” Levi asked coolly, eyes flaring. “If not, shut the hell up. If yes, you’ve got your wish.”

“Don’t you dare!” Mikasa suddenly sprung to life, leaping to her feet. “Don’t you *dare!*” Her chest was heaving and she glared at Levi, breathing heavily through her nostrils as if she had just run a mile.

“Sir,” Eren snarled through gritted teeth. “With all due respect, this doesn’t concern anyone else—”

“Then why would it be in the episode?” There was sympathy in Hange’s eyes, but their voice was firm. “Eren, Mikasa, there has to be a reason why—”

“There isn’t!” Eren howled. “We—”

“Shouting isn’t going to solve anything.” Erwin stood, towering height adding weight to his words. “Eren, Ackerman, sit down. Sit *down*,” he repeated, gaze cold and authoritative when neither person moved. Mikasa sat down slowly, knuckles white. Eren glared at the wall for a moment before flopping back down onto the couch, all but clawing at the material beneath him as he curled his hands into tight fists. “Omni,” he addressed the silent watcher. She had woken up at some point during the shouting match and was curled up in her seat not unlike a cat, watching carefully, thumb tapping out a steady tattoo on the screen of her small black rectangle. “The next bit of this episode—how important is it that we watch it?”

The swirling nebulas in Omni’s eyes shifted, stars spiraling, as her gaze flicked from Erwin’s face to Eren and Mikasa. “Very,” she finally answered, lowering the rectangle. Her expression was indecipherable, pity unreadable from cold cynicism. “Very.”

Eren snarled, whipping his head around to glare at another spot of wall, glowering at it with intensity to set it ablaze. “Is it necessary for everyone to see it?” Erwin asked.

“No.” Mikasa turned slightly in Omni’s direction. “Not everyone. But there are some things that. . . people should know. If,” Eren turned to look at the woman, “it’s really, *really*, that big of a deal, Mikasa doesn’t want to watch it. You can go wait somewhere else until the episode’s over.”

“What, and leave everyone else to watch it play out?” Eren snapped. “Are you out of your—”

“I was asking Mikasa,” Omni cut him off. “Not you.”

Eren scowled. “Mikasa?” Petra asked gently, kindly.

She stared at the carpet for a minute that seemed to drag out into an eternity. Nobody moved, all eyes fixed on the girl. “I—” She wet her lips, glancing at Eren. “I’ll. . .” She looked at Omni. “I’m going to wait somewhere else.”

Eren scowled again but complied, standing up. “Fine. Armin?”

Armin started, staring up at his friends. “Wh—oh, yeah. Okay.” He hurried to his feet, too.

“I’ll go with you,” Marco offered, jumping to his feet as well. “Your room? Or do you guys want to—”

“Room,” Eren answered shortly, marching past, Mikasa and Armin on his heels. Moblit winced as the entire apartment seemed to shake from the force of their feet on the stairs and stomps in the hallway above. A loud *crash* rang through the halls as someone—presumably Eren—slammed the door shut.

“Eren,” Connie whispered to Jean and Sasha. “He seemed a lot more upset than Mikasa was.”

“Nah, Mikasa was understandable, at least,” Jean muttered back. “But Eren. . . I don’t even know. What the hell was he doing?” Sasha shrugged helplessly and the three friends turned back to the screen, bracing themselves for what they all knew was to come.

The side of Mrs. Ackerman head rested in a pool of deep, inky red, and her skin was pale, almost white. Grisha gingerly took her wrist and lifted her arm. He made a choked-off noise and tenderly lowered her arm back onto the ground. “It’s too late,” he whispered.

Gunther looked at the blood staining the neck of Mrs. Ackerman’s sweater, then at the limp form of what he knew to have once been Mr. Ackerman slumped against a table leg, and felt sick. *What happened?* He’d seen more than enough bloodshed at the hands of Titans, but this was nothing like what he was used to. The body left to cool on the ground was too still, to clean, too unmarked to have been slaughtered by a Titan, or even a wild animal. *What* happened*?*

“Eren,” Grisha said sharply, looking up. “Did you see the girl, Mikasa, anywhere?”

She’s fine, Connie reminded himself, hoping no one else could hear the beat of his heart as it slammed against his ribcage so forcefully he feared it would break out. *She’s fine, she’s fine. You just saw her, she’s upstairs with Marco.*

But just because she’s fine now *doesn’t mean that nothing happened*, a small, dark corner of his brain whispered back. Connie gulped as quietly as he could, blood draining from his face.

Eren stood in the doorway, a dark silhouette against the brightness outside. “No,” he said quietly after a moment of silence.

“He should have looked around the rest of the house,” Levi muttered. “If they hadn’t gotten her, she’d probably have been hiding under a bed or in a closet or something.”

Erwin spared Levi a short, concerned frown. “I’m more focused on Eren,” he said. “I understand the circumstances, but not letting him just stand there and look.”

Levi shook his head. “At this point,” he said, “I’m sure we’ve all got enough questions about Grisha Jaeger to fill a damn file.”

“All right,” Grisha sighed, looking away from Mrs. Ackerman’s body. “I need to alert the Military Police to investigate this,” he told Eren. “You stay at the foot of the mountain.”

“He’s just gonna leave his kid?” Eld asked, jaw slackening in disbelief. “With a murderer on the loose?”

Sasha gasped. “The murderer’s gonna catch him!” she exclaimed. Hange, Levi, Mike, and Erwin exchanged a glance. “Listen to the music!” She shuddered as the ghostly choir reached an eerie crescendo, like nails scraping down a chalkboard.

“Understood? Eren!” Eren’s eyes were wide, impossibly bright, but unseeing, shadowed and lit up with an almost brilliant, fractured light. “Eren!”

“Look at his eyes,” Connie muttered. “I don’t think I’ve ever seen Eren that scared before.”

“Are you fucking blind?” Jean smacked the back of his head. “He’s not *scared*, dimwit.”

“Then what?” Connie challenged.

Jean hesitated, frowning at the screen. “He looks. . .” he said, “I don’t know.”

“Insane?” Sasha offered quietly.

“At this point,” Connie joked uneasily, “I’d be more worried about Eren getting the murderer.”

The camera panned over top of the dense woods, brushing the tips of the towering junipers. A cabin, larger and grander than the Ackermans’, built with brick, stone, wood and tile, sat in a small clearing, the windows dark, not a wisp of smoke escaping from the chimney.

“Hey,” a rough voice spoke. The rain was quieter from inside the cabin, though not by much. “Are you sure we can sell her? I don’t want to have killed her parents for nothing.”

Had one listened carefully, they might have been able to hear the snapping of muscles as every last person in the room stiffened. “What,” Annie whispered.

The room was well-accustomed to silence at this point, but this one was different. Less tense and more shocked. Less shocked and more horrified. Less horrified and more furious.

“Look at her face,” a man in a chair said, nodding at the limp girl, her hands tied behind her back, on the ground, “and tell me what she’s worth.”

“Oh, my Fritz,” Petra whispered, pressing a hand to her mouth. “Oh, my *God*.”

“Tell me they’re not talking about what I think they’re talking about,” Sasha breathed, face pale. “Someone—someone pinch me and tell me I’m dreaming.”

Connie shook his head slowly, face a light shade of green. “That’d have to be one fucked-up dream,” he choked out.

A bald man in a green shirt stepped over her and pushed a foot against her ribs, flipping her over onto her back. "Sure, she's cute," he said, leaning over her, "but she's still a kid. She's not really my type."

Holy shit. Ymir stared at the screen, eyes wide in shock. The girl on the ground was limp as a ragdoll, eyes vacant, not even twitching as the weaselly-looking man tossed her around like a sack of potatoes. She felt her stomach twist as she listened to the two men talk, sounding so much like the men who'd captured Krista during that damned training exercise, chatting with the ease of men who cared about human rights about as much as a cow did for fine wine. *Paradise*, she nearly scoffed aloud. *Heaven. Yeah, right*.

"I didn't ask what your type was," the other man, a cap perched over his short-cropped hair, replied, crossing his arms. "She's an Asian."

What the hell does that mean? A small frown forced its way through the barrier of Gunther's glare. *And what the hell does that have to do with anything?*

Mikasa lay on the ground, hair strewn around her head in a messy mat, a smudge of blood next to her mouth. Her eyes were blank, glazed over, as she stared up at the roof into nothing. "Back in the day, humans used to have 'races,'" the man said. "So that one, from way back when, is a descendant of those who came from Asia."

"Seriously?" Sasha demanded, fury on behalf of her friend overpowering the confusion at the idea of "races." "That's why? They'd kill her parents and try to—" she ground her teeth around the word, mouth sour and dry, "*sell* her just because she *looks* different?"

"How can people even do that?" Connie looked sickened, mouth tight, eyes wide with horror to match his expression during the Battle of Trost. "How can— She's just a kid!"

"She's *human*," Oluo whispered, all traces of bravado wiped away and replaced by deep, stone-cold horror. "So—so what if she's from another race or whatever the hell they mean? They can't just—" He clapped his hands over his mouth, white as a sheet of freshly fallen snow.

"This is disgusting," Eld nearly choked on the words, looking as if he had just swallowed a frog.

Mikasa stared through the window at the open sky, mouth slightly agape. There was a lost, dazed look in her eyes, as if she wasn't quite sure where she was. "The old perverts in the capital really go for that sort of thing. She's the last survivor of her race, so we should get a good price."

Oh, my God. Petra's stomach turned, remembering the other guests milling around the halls of the palace during the last military function they'd been invited to. The round, squat men, with grubby hands and thick, wrinkled skin, all of them dressed in silk and velvet finery, enough noble crests stitched into their robes to make an archivist faint, sweating like pigs beneath the candlelight, had creeped her out then, with their lecherous leers and slurred, stuttering comments, but now. . . "They're talking like they've done it before," she whispered, lips barely moving, body slow to catch up with her hampered-and-racing mind. "Like they've. . .

like they've *sold*—" her entire body shivered as the word fell from her mouth, "—people before. Like they've—" Eld grabbed her hand, despite his shaking just as hard. "Like they've—" she broke off with a noise that was half-gag, half-sob, leaning against her friend's shoulder, a quaking hand held over quivering lips.

Even in the Walls. . . Bertolt looked away, face pale. Reiner placed a hand on his shoulder. "It's not our fault, right?" he whispered, hand shaking. "This—this was before Wall Maria. This doesn't have anything to do with us. It's not—" He squeezed his eyes shut, the fat man's words echoing in his head.

"Yeah." Reiner's voice was faint, subdued. "Yeah. This is just. . ." He trailed off, staring distantly at the screen. "Eldians."

"Her father didn't look like an Asian to me," the other man drawled, looking over his shoulder. "She's not a purebred."

"She's not a *dog*," Sasha nearly snarled, teeth clenched tighter than a noble lady clutching onto her fan. "You can't be 'purebred' when we're all human!"

"Not them," Jean muttered, hands fisted tightly in both sides of his jacket. "They're—those two—those *bastards*," he snarled. "They're—fuck, they're not even *animals*! They're—" he ran a tongue over his teeth, feeling them dig into the tender organ as he scraped it along his mouth. "Worse," he growled.

The room shook as the other man stomped the ground furiously. "Yes, she is!" he bellowed. "The real valuable one was her mother, but you had to freak out and kill her!"

"What was I supposed to do?" the skinny man in green protested, waving his arms. "She was putting up a fight!"

"What the hell did he expect her to do?" Connie demanded. "Just go with them? Take her kid by the hand and follow these—" His lips went dry and he looked away from the screen, gritting his teeth.

"They're talking about them like they don't even have minds of their own," Moblit muttered, stomach dipping. "Like they're animals. Like they're. . ." A word materialized in his mind, one that Eren himself was so fond of saying. "Livestock."

"Is that all you can say? Huh?" Mikasa watched the two men with the unfocused eyes of an observer, quiet and still as a corpse, hair falling over her face, as the screen turned black.

Two knocks rang through the darkness and a wooden door opened. "Dr. Jaeger!" Mr. Ackerman appeared in the doorway with a warm smile, golden eyes glimmering invitingly.

Krista whipped her head around, burying her face in Ymir's chest as memories of gleaming blades, flashing in flickering torchlight, and blood-soaked earth flew threw her head. "I can't watch this," she whispered.

“We’ve been waiting. . .” Light flashed off of the edge of a blade and Mr. Ackerman stilled, eyes widening in horror. He looked down slowly and a hand drew back, a knife soaked in red and burst of blood following it.

Sasha didn’t even have time to cry out or cover her mouth as it fell open in shock. *So quick*. . . an icy chill, colder than the dead of night in the middle of winter, blew threw her veins, turning her blood to ice. *Like he was nothing*.

Mr. Ackerman made a choked, gargling noise as he stumbled backwards and fell, the entire cabin shaking as his body tumbled to the ground.

Jean couldn’t breathe. Death was something he was used to at this point—he’d fought in, and survived, a battle unlike anything the Walls had ever seen, watched more friends than he could count die, spent the days afterwards piling up a mountain of bodies until he could no longer tell one face from another, and had just relived the beginning of some of the worst weeks of his life in monstrously vivid detail. No matter how much they, in some twisted, macabre way, resembled humans, Titans were *not*. But this. . . *How can someone just kill another human?* He felt as if the room were spinning, his feet coming up to meet his head, the couches twisting and turning themselves inside out, the walls tilting as they whirled around and around in a twisted, dizzying dance.

Jean knew death. Not murder.

Mikasa and Mrs. Ackerman looked up at the commotion, and their smiles dropped. “Sorry,” the heavyset man with the cap, two other men behind him, stepped forwards, bloody knife hanging casually by his side, droopy eyes blank and remorseless. “Hope we’re not intruding.”

Connie leapt to his feet, a hand tightly clapped over his mouth, toppling over Jean and Sasha’s legs as he stumbled away from the couches, nearly crashing to the ground as he scrambled across the room. The bathroom door crashed against the wall and he collapsed to his knees, fingers white as the porcelain bowl he gripped with shaking hands. A sour lump rose at the back of his mouth and he pitched forwards, stomach heaving and throat burning as sick splattered the sides of the bowl and the water. It seemed to take ages before his stomach was finally empty, every single cracker, fruit, sandwich, and sweet he’d eaten in the past hours regurgitated and upchucked into the toilet.

The hinges of the door creaked as someone walked into the room, shutting it with a *click*. There was a small *tink* as something was put down on the counter and then a gentle hand was on his back, rubbing slow, comforting circles between his shoulder blades. Connie groaned, mouth sour and coated in bile, resting his forehead on the seat. “‘M fine,” he muttered, wrinkling his nose at the smell of his own breath.

“Nah,” Sasha muttered. Connie’s cheeks turned red and he fumbled with the toilet seat, bringing it down with a *crash*. Sasha reached up and pulled the lever. They sat on the ground in silence, listening to the muffled sounds of the TV outside and the gurgle of the water in the

tank. Sasha reached up, picking up the glass of water she'd placed on the counter and handed it to him. He took it wordlessly, averting her gaze, cheeks still burning, and brought it to his lips, swishing it around his mouth. Sasha was silent, knees drawn up to her chest, as he lifted the toilet lid, spitting it out.

"It's shit," Connie finally muttered, standing up. Sasha didn't say anything, just nodded, as she opened the door. No one paid them any attention, for which he was grateful, as they returned to the TV and took their seats in the back.

Mrs. Ackerman stared at the knife, eyes wide, shaking with horror, watching as a drop of blood dangled at the tip and fell to the floor below, the drop splattering onto the wood. A shaking hand reached slowly for the embroidery scissors sitting on the table.

"Don't," Levi muttered. The knife's reach was far greater than the flimsy pair of scissors, and the man larger and stronger. *She'd be down before she even got close*.

"Let's take this nice and easy," the taller man said, voice like a croak. "I don't want to use this thing." He held up an axe, the edge glinting as he waved it in the air above his head.

He— Petra felt sick, seconds from following Connie's example. "How can he act so casual about this?" she whispered, voice shaky. "He—they just *killed* him—" her mouth was dry, "and they still—"

Mikasa gasped as Mrs. Ackerman suddenly shot out of her seat, grabbing the scissors. A primal, guttural scream tore its way out of her throat as she ran at the man with the axe, scissors flashing in her grip. "Wh—" He grabbed her wrists, struggling as she flailed about in his grip, wailing. "This crazy woman!"

"*She's* the crazy one?" Jean couldn't help demanding. His face was pale, but he still felt like he was burning, blood boiling, yet frozen at the same time, tearing him apart from within. "*She* is?"

"Does he even know that they're human?" Moblit whispered.

"Run!" Mrs. Ackerman's eyes were wide with wild fury as she tugged at her wrists, shoving the scissors towards the man's throat. "Mikasa!"

"Mother!" Mikasa stood, staring, stunned, at the scene before her.

"Mikasa!" Mrs. Ackerman looked over her shoulder desperately. "Hurry!"

"But. . ." Mikasa's hands were shaking, clenched in front of her chest. She looked down, shaking, at her father's body, blood already pooling beneath his limp, twisted limbs. "Father?"

Sasha half-expected Mikasa to jump up and attack the men, take them down in two seconds and save her mother before they could even react. *No*. Her hands shook in her lap. The girl on screen wasn't the one they knew—she wasn't strong or fearless, wasn't a fighter.

This changed her, Hange thought, forcing themself to think analytically. *That much is obvious. But that still doesn't explain*. . . They frowned, scratching idly at the corner of their

page. *Maybe the trauma was enough to change her* mentally*,* they thought, *but there's no way that that can explain her strength, too. Can it?*

"Damn!" The man with the axe scowled as the scissors nearly grazed his neck and raised his axe. "Stop it!"

Connie squeezed his eyes shut, clapping his hands over his ears.

Mrs. Ackerman let out a final, shrill shriek before her body stilled, geysers of blood spraying through the air. Her arms fell to her side, dress and sweater already drenched with patches of red. Mikasa stilled, a gasp filling her breathless lungs, heart stopping in her chest.

Mike inhaled sharply and Moblit made a choked-off noise of shock, paper crumpling as he clutched his notebook, knuckles white. Gunther all but threw down his bowl of small, sweet squares of grain, bowl clattering against the table, paler than a ghost on a foggy night.

Mrs. Ackerman seemed to fall in slow motion, the scissors clattering from her hand, forgotten. She reached out towards Mikasa, even though her arm had been nearly severed from her body, gripping her shoulder, specks of crimson flying from her wound and mouth as her lips moved, a silent plea for Mikasa to *run*. She collapsed, vermillion pooling around her as she went still, light draining from her eyes.

She died for her. Krista felt light-headed, disconnected, as if she were floating away from her body, not really seeing or understanding what was happening. *She died trying to protect her*. For a moment, her vision wavered, and the woman in the vision changed, her simple dress and sweater turning into a long pink coat lined with fur, her hair changing from raven black to blood-soaked strands of dishwater blonde. She shook her head forcefully, squeezing her eyes shut. *No*, she snapped at herself. *This isn't about you.* Forget *it*.

"Y—" The man with the cap stumbled forwards. "You idiot! The plan was only to kill the father!"

"She was crazy!" the other man protested, turning around.

"They really didn't care." Petra stared blankly at the screen, eyes wide and dazed. "They saw them as wares," she breathed. "Merchandise. They didn't even see them as people." Oluo reached out tentatively, gripping her shaking hand in his. She shook her head slowly, eyes glazed and unfocused, watching the scene unfold like a gruesome pantomime, not really seeing it. "How can they do that?" she whispered, lower lip quivering, vision blurring as tears filled her eyes. "How can they just look at someone and—" she didn't finish the sentence, clenching her teeth as she looked down at her lap, squeezing her eyes shut. "How?" she whispered, fingers tightening around Oluo's. "How can someone be so heartless?"

Oluo shook his head, looking resolutely down at the floor. "I don't know," he replied, voice barely above a whisper. Levi's eyes were shadowed, arms crossed across his chest, as he listened. "I really don't know."

"I don't want to hear it! Just grab the kid!" Mikasa stood, shock-still, eyes wide and shaking with horror, where they'd left her, staring down at her mother's body.

“Oi,” the taller man drawled, stepping carelessly over the fallen woman.

Waves of disgust rolled over Ymir as she stared coldly at the man on screen. Corpses were something she’d been used to since her formative years, not to mention the centuries upon centuries of unfamiliar memories stacked in the back of her mind, and what little lingering care she used to have around them had been wiped clean by the days and weeks of dragging them out from under crushed timber, stacking them up like sacks of potatoes, and tossing them into blazing bonfires like unorthodox bits of kindling. Even so, an uncomfortable shiver ran down her back at the sight of the man stepping over the body he’d put there himself only seconds before, tracking blood across the wooden floor like it was nothing. “This is fucked up,” she muttered, grip tightening unconsciously on the girl in her arms. “Fucked up.”

“Let’s not give me any attitude, all right?” Mikasa was silent, limp as a ragdoll, as the man grabbed her collar, dragging her up to her toes, and waved a fist. “Or else you’ll get it.” He swung and the screen went black.

Rain streamed down the window, distorting and warping the trees outside. Mikasa stared, still and lifeless on the ground. *So cold*. . .

She doesn’t even have any fight in her, Hange realized, heart clenching, as if someone had wrapped their fingers around it and squeezed. “It’s like she’s already accepted it,” they said quietly. “As her fate, I mean.”

Moblit shrugged helplessly. “She’s a kid,” he muttered. “And she just watched her parents get murdered. She’s in shock.”

She is. Hange furrowed their brow, glancing down at their notebook. *In fact, it doesn’t look like she can even move a muscle. So how does a little girl,* they wondered, *near dead with exhaustion, get up and stab a man through the heart?* They scowled, ruffling their hair in frustration, flakes of dandruff drifting down to land on the pages. *It just doesn’t make sense*.

The two men were seen arguing through the outside of the window, shouting silently at each other while rain fell in heavy droves. Suddenly, the door creaked open and both men gasped, turning around.

Sasha perked up slightly. “Is it the Police?” she asked.

“God, I hope so,” Jean muttered.

“Pardon me,” a voice said, quiet, but cutting through the tense silence of the room like a bullet.

Gasps resounded through the room at the sound of the familiar voice. “No fucking way.” Gunther gaped, eyes larger than the full moon.

“He *can’t* be that stupid,” Jean spluttered. “He can’t! Not even he—!”

The taller man was the first to move, scowling as he marched forwards. “You little snot!” he snarled. He grabbed onto the doorframe, leaning over the Eren’s little form, glaring down at him. “How did you find this place?”

Eren jumped, taking a step back as the man shoved the door open, the cabin quaking as it collided against it. "Uh—" Large, fat tears fell from his eyes as he looked up, lower lip quivering.

"Wha—Eren's *crying*?" Ymir exclaimed, flabbergasted.

"Well—" he took a small shuddering breath. "I was lost in the woods and I saw your cabin," he said, voice shaking.

"He's crying because he's *scared*?" Ymir's mouth was hanging open, nearly unhinged. "I never thought I'd see the day."

"He's just a little kid," Krista said. "I mean, he couldn't have *always* been like the Eren we know now. Remember the last episode?"

"Is he actually lost?" Sasha asked. "Like, did he actually find them by accident?"

"Looks like it." Jean looked dumbfounded.

The man frowned, glancing over his shoulder to look at his partner, who shrugged, waving a hand dismissively. He sighed, looking back at Eren. "A kid your age shouldn't be out in the woods alone." He knelt in front of Eren with a small smile, ruffling his hair.

Eld stared at the hand: the same hand that had swung the axe that had killed Mrs. Ackerman, the same hand that had knocked out her daughter with one blow, the same hand that had doubtless ruined countless lives already. The same hand that was buried in a child's hair—in *Eren*'s hair. His stomach heaved and he leaned against the back of the couch, looking away from the screen, jaw clenched.

"Oh, my god," Petra muttered, realization dawning on her face. "They're planning to take him too, aren't they?" She inhaled sharply when nobody responded, face paling.

"How—" Oluo gulped. "They're kids," he whispered. "Two little kids. How the hell do they get out of this?"

"I. . ." Eld trailed off, staring helplessly at the screen. "I don't know," he finally said, dread pooling in the pit of his stomach. *They look fine*, he told himself, thinking of the children who'd marched upstairs with their friends earlier. *But does that mean that they* are*? Are they, really, truly,* fine*? Are they even remotely okay?* His stomach twisted when he realized he didn't have the answer.

"There are big bad wolves around here." The man grinned, the picture of friendliness and welcoming.

"If I didn't know what he was planning to do—what he *did*," Sasha said quietly, voice shaky and watery, "I'd actually think—" she took a deep breath. "I'd actually think he meant it," she whispered, cheeks flushing with shame. "I'd actually think he was a good guy. That he actually, really, wanted to help." She bit her lip and looked down, cheeks burning. "God, I'm so fucking naïve," she whispered.

"You're not." Sasha jumped at the quiet voice. Bertolt was turned towards her, eyes not entirely locked on hers, gaze fixed on a point in between her nose and right eyebrow. "Naïve, I

mean," he whispered. "People—" his gaze flicked away for the fraction of a second, so quickly that Sasha almost thought she'd imagined it. Bertolt pursed his lips. "Most people don't look at another person and think 'monster,'" he said, voice near inaudible. "It'd—it'd have to be a pretty fucked-up world if people went around, thinking the worst of everyone they met and not trusting anyone." He glanced at her right ear, worrying his lower lip. "I'm just saying," he said quietly. "Wanting to trust people doesn't make you naïve or stupid. It just makes you. . ." he hesitated for a moment, "good, I guess," he finished with a small shrug. "So—so don't blame yourself," he said, looking away. "For trusting a bad guy, I mean." He turned around, facing back towards the screen, steadfastly avoiding Reiner and Annie's gazes—Reiner's, shocked, and Annie's, carefully masked curiosity.

Light flashed behind Eren as he shifted his grip, clenching the handle of a knife held tightly in his right hand.

Krista gasped, the moment of silence left after Bertolt's speech shattering like a glass vase. "Oh, my—"

"Holy *fuck*." Connie managed to force the two words up, his throat dry, constricted by shock. "*Holy*—"

"Oh, my god." Gunther gripped the sides of his head. "Oh, my god. Oh, my *god*. Okay. Okay, okay. I need to process this. I can't—" He squeezed his eyes shut, shaking his head. "He wasn't lost," he whispered. "He wasn't lost. He— Oh, my god, he went *looking* for them, didn't he?"

"Holy shit," Ymir muttered. "It's almost a shame that kid didn't go into theatre."

"Ymir!" Krista half-shouted, half-squeaked. Her face was pale, hands flapping wildly at her sides. "This isn't—this isn't funny!"

"Oh, my *god*." Sasha inhaled sharply, blood draining from her face. "Episode four. That flashback—from when he was doing that training exercise with the knife and the thingy with Reiner, before Annie knocked him over—"

"Little Eren in log cabin." Eld looked like he hadn't decided between fainting and vomiting, cheeks a pale green, eyes dazed and bleary. "Dead body."

"But," Krista hesitated. "He won't *really* kill them," she finally said, voice tentative, almost fearful. "Will he?"

"Don't worry," the man reassured him. "You're safe now. If you stay with us—" He stiffened, eyes widening, hand freezing on top of Eren's head.

"I appreciate that, sir," Eren said quietly, all traces of the scared and shaking little boy gone, voice flat and cold. "I understand." He raised a small hand, pushing the man's hand out of his hair. He glared up at the man, eyes bright with fury. "Die, you bastard!"

Oh, my god. Moblit stared at the screen, eyes wide, horrorstruck. *OH, MY GOD*.

He ripped the blade out of the man's neck, blood gushing forth and splattering the wall behind him as the body crumpled, falling onto its front.

“He killed him.” Connie’s voice was faint, and felt as though he was ready to heave up what little bit of water he’d had in the past few minutes. “He’s dead. Eren—he stabbed him. In the neck.” His hands were beginning to shake. “He’s—he’s dead.” *My friend is a murderer*.

“Eh—?!” The other man leapt to his feet, the chair toppling behind him. “This can’t be!” Eren stared at him coldly, the rusted hinges squeaking as he pulled the door shut behind him. “W—” He gulped, sweat beading on his face. “Wait, you punk!”

He grabbed the axe from where it leant against the wall and swung the door open, swivelling his head back and forth as he stared at the empty room.

A stab of fear shot through Sasha’s heart, a bit of hunter’s sense breaking through her thoroughly justified bubble of shock and anic. *That knife’s a lot smaller than the axe*, she thought, heart pounding. *And Eren’s tiny. It’d be like trying to kill a wolf with a toothpick*.

“Uh—!” He didn’t even have time to scream as Eren ran forwards, brandishing a broom. The little boy yelled as he thrust the knife tied to the end of the makeshift spear into the man’s stomach, shoving him into the other room. The cabin shook on its foundations as the body collapsed.

The body and the broom handle, Connie thought. He resisted the urge to giggle, and instantly felt repulsed.

This wasn’t a spur-of-the-moment decision, Eld realized, staring at the crude weapon in Eren’s hands. *He had time to make that spear and hide it. He didn’t just come to the house to save Mikasa—he was planning to kill those men*.

Wet, ripping sounds tore through the air, and Mikasa finally looked over, turning her head to the side.

That was their first meeting, Oluo thought, clothes damp with cold sweat. *Fritz’s dick, this is fucked up*.

“Die, you animal!” Mikasa gasped, eyes flying open, sharp and focused, sweat dotting her temple. “This is what you get!” Eren raised his knife, stabbing it again and again into the corpse’s chest, blood and gore splattering the ground and walls, geysers of it shooting high enough to paint the ceiling. “Die!” Mikasa watched as Eren brought the knife again, the image moving almost in slow motion. “Don’t you ever stand up again!” His eyes were wide, furious tears running down his face, blood flecking the air around him as he drew up his arm, ready to strike down the tattered body below him like a great god of destruction.

I knew it was brutal, but this. . . Mike stared at the screen, peering, wide-eyed, through the curtain of hair in front of his face. *He’s tearing him apart*.

Die, you animal! Eren’s words bounced around Gunther’s head, echoing over and over again, like a shout in an empty cavern. *Die, you animal! Die, you animal! DIE, YOU ANIMAL!* He jerked, shivering, as a sudden chill blew threw him like a rain of frozen daggers.

Eld suddenly felt very uncomfortable. *He called them animals*, he thought. *He didn’t necessarily think of them the way they thought of Mikasa and her mother, but*. . . He shuddered,

suddenly wondering whether the Titan was really the part of Eren they should be most worried about.

And, just as suddenly as it had started, it stopped. Eren straddled the shredded corpse, breathing heavily, chest heaving as he panted for breath. Mikasa stared at the boy, the light from the window behind him illuminating him as a sharp silhouette. Eren took a deep breath, wiping his sleeve across his forehead. He turned around, spotting Mikasa on the ground. "You're safe now," he told her, still a bit breathless. "Don't worry."

"That's it?" To say Ymir was shocked would be like saying that an open flame was a little bit warm. *It's like he's another side of the same coin*, she thought. *One moment, he's a fucked-up, practically psychotic, killing machine, and, in the next, he's. . . not*.

The ropes around her wrists snapped as Eren worked the crimson-soaked blade through them and tugged. "You're Mikasa, right?" he asked, putting the knife to the side and unravelling the rest of the ropes by hand. "I'm Eren. I'm Dr. Jaeger's son," he said when Mikasa remained silent. "I'm sure you've met my father before." Mikasa's gaze was fixed on the empty space before her, lips parted, but silent. "We stopped by your house today for a checkup. But then. . ."

Levi furrowed his brow. "This isn't right," he said.

"What?" Eld asked. "Sir," he added.

"This isn't right," Levi repeated. "Earlier, at their cabin—wasn't there another guy?"

A memory of the men at her door suddenly flashed through Mikasa's mind, a recollection of another man, with a square, blockish haircut and dull, wideset eyes, standing behind them.

"Holy shit, there was," Sasha gasped.

"So. . ." Connie shifted in his seat, glancing around furtively. "Where is he?"

Eren watched as she drew her hands towards herself, rubbing her wrists. "There were three of them," she told him. Eren stiffened, eyes widening. A floorboard creaked behind them and they whirled around.

"Oh, *fuck*," Gunther hissed.

The third man towered over them, staring down in shock. Eren's eyes widened even more and he dove towards the knife he'd cast aside. Before he could reach it, a foot shot out, kicking him sharply in the gut and sending him flying towards the other side of the room. He yelled in pain as he rolled across the ground, back colliding harshly with the wall.

"This is all your doing, isn't it?" The man stepped towards the writhing boy, staring blankly down at him. Eren let out a hiss of pain as he grabbed his hair and hauled him into the air. "It was you who did this!" Mikasa knelt on the ground, staring in horror as the man gripped Eren's throat, shaking him as he yelled. "I'm going to kill you! I'm going to kill you!"

“These assholes really don’t have any sense of morality, do they?” Sasha muttered, despite the conflicted clench in her chest at the sight of Eren—still soaked in the blood of the other men—in the man’s grip. “Do they only start caring once their own pals are dead?”

“‘S just how the world works in some places,” Mike muttered. Levi was silent. “It. . .” he trailed off, pursing his lips.

Eren forced his eyes open, meeting Mikasa’s gaze as he clawed at the hands cutting off his air. “Fight!” he croaked. Mikasa stared. “You have to fight!” He squeezed his eyes shut, saliva running from the corner of his mouth. “You’ll die,” he forced out, voice tight, “if you don’t.” Light glinted off the edge of the knife lying on the ground, blood still drying on the blade. “If you win, you live—”

“He can’t *actually* be trying to make a speech *now*!” Jean cried, masking the rising panic in the pit of his chest with incredulity. “Seriously? While he’s being choked to death?”

“Save your breath!” Sasha shouted. She knew full well that, despite the TV looked nothing short of a direct window into the past, the little boy on screen couldn’t hear her, but the hysterical frenzy she was thrown into at the sight of his small fingers scrabbling at the hands at his throat was enough to make her forget.

“What are you saying?” the man snarled, tightening his grip.

“You can’t win unless you fight.” Eren’s words were nearly inaudible but his eyes were bright, locked with Mikasa’s over his attacker’s shoulder.

Mikasa’s eyes widened with a small gasp and she grabbed the knife, scrambling to her feet. She clenched it with both hands in front of her, shaking as she stared at the man. “I can’t,” she whispered, terrified tears flowing down her face.

She’s a child, Petra thought, one hand held over her mouth, the other curled into a tight fist at her side. *She’s a child—a* normal *child. Not like*— She pursed her lips, train of thought skittering for a moment as she stared at the screen. *Not like Eren*.

A flash of lightning illuminated the room in an ethereal blue light and the image froze.

“What?” Ymir sat up straight, jostling Krista as she did so, frowning.

“Lightning?” Sasha asked, bewildered.

“Well, it was raining outside,” Connie said.

“Yeah, but this isn’t *that* kind of lightning,” Jean said. “This is that weird thing the TV does where it freezes sometimes, and we get a long-ass monologue.”

“So we’re gonna get a Mikasa monologue?” Connie looked slightly unsettled. “About. . . you know. . .” He made an awkward chopping motion with his arm, fist clenched, miming stabbing someone.

Mikasa’s eyes were wide, fixed on Eren. *That’s when I remembered*. Eren’s hands slackened and his arms fell slowly, hanging limply at his sides.

Krista stiffened, eyes widening. “He’s fine,” Ymir reminded her. “Upstairs throwing a tantrum, remember?”

"Not *now* he isn't," Krista said, gesturing at the screen.

"Yeah, well, that was in the past," Ymir countered.

"Is it?" Krista challenged. "How are they showing this to us, Ymir? It's too perfect to be a recreation. So does that mean invisible little people are following us every day, recording everything we do and playing a soundtrack that we can't even hear along with it? Or, or—" she waved her hand around as she searched her mind for the words. "Or does the TV look back in time? Are we actually watching things as they play out?" She dropped her arms, tugging anxiously at the tips of her fingers. "Either way—it's real. So, so—" Her lip quivered for a moment before she took a deep breath. "It's just," she said slowly, "easy to get caught up in it."

Ymir sighed, looking back at the TV. "Yeah," she muttered. "Trust me, I know."

***I've seen it before*. A memory flashed through her mind: a grasshopper, mandibles tearing at the body of a moth. *I've seen it many times before*. Her eyes widened as she remembered sitting in the garden with her mother, laughing and picking berries from the lush, plentiful bushes. *I had always noticed it*. The younger Mikasa, wearing an oversized orange shirt over a pair of loose white pants, a hat perched on her head, paused, spotting the grasshopper and the moth in its grip, holes torn through its wings, still struggling, even with half its legs missing.**

It's almost like a metaphor for the Titans. Moblit stared at the grasshopper uneasily as it picked away at its prey, taking its time as it slowly devoured it, bit by bit. How many times had he seen the same thing play out on the battlefield? How many times had he had to watch while other soldiers were plucked from their horses like hors d'oeuvres from a tray? How many nights had he lain awake, their screams echoing in the back of his mind? *Or am I just reading too much into it?*

***I had always noticed it*. Mikasa stared at the hunter and its prey, eyes wide, before something else grabbed her attention. Her mother stood, smiling and waving as her father joined them, grinning as he held up a dead duck by the neck, his rifle slung over his shoulder. *This world*. . . Mikasa smiled hesitantly, staring at the duck uneasily, *is cruel*.**

So that's where her philosophy came from, Hange thought. *Not that I blame her. No*. They frowned. *In fact, I'm surprised that she can still smile, after all she's been through*. They furrowed their brow, tilting their head. Have *we seen her smile?* They didn't know.

***All of a sudden, my body wasn't shaking*. The rest of the room had fallen away, leaving only Mikasa in her own little world, illuminated in unearthly shades of red and green. Her eyes were wide, staring into space, unseeing.**

Levi leaned forwards, eyes narrowing. Annie and Reiner exchanged a glance.

A moment of clarity? Eld frowned. *I don't get it. Why now? What happened?*

***I've been in total control of myself ever since*. Mikasa's eyes were wide, almost unnaturally so, her pupils seeming to quiver as a chill ran through her. *I believed I could do anything*.**

Like you knew exactly what to do. Levi inhaled quietly, eyes widening slowly.

Fight! **The whispered command echoed through her mind and, suddenly, the screen was overtaken with flashes of green lightning, chasing over her brain and wrapping around her body, sparking and streaking over and through her, crackling with untold energy.**

"Woah!" Gunther jumped in his seat. Levi's eyes flew wide open, lips parting slightly in a small gasp. "What the hell?!" Bertolt glanced at Reiner who nodded his confirmation, brow creased.

"What in the *world*?!" The tip of Hange's pencil nearly tore through the paper. "Holy shit! Holy shit! Erwin, Levi, are you seeing this?" They whirled around, pencil still moving. "Levi—!" They paused, frowning at the sight of Levi's paler than usual visage and wide eyes. "Levi?"

"She's turning into a Titan!" Connie screeched, scrambling at the couch as he clambered up onto it, clinging onto the back like a panicked sloth.

"Don't be stupid!" Jean snapped, grabbing the lapels of Connie's jacket before he could fall off. "It's just that drama thing the TV does!"

"No, but look at it!" Connie flopped back onto the couch, legs sprawled across Jean's lap, and waved his hands frantically at the screen. "Look! It's like that Titan lightning thing!"

"Titan lightning's yellow!" Sasha said, shoving his elbow off her leg. "That's—Mikasa's not a Titan!"

"Then what is it?" Connie demanded.

"I said it was the drama thing!" Jean protested. "I mean, what else could it be?"

The lights faded and she found herself staring at Eren again, eyes wide. ***Fight!*** **Ropes of muscle bulged, twisting, and she clenched her hand, the handle of the knife shattering in her grip.**

"Oh, holy fucking shit," Eld gasped. "Oh, my *god*."

"What was that?" Petra squeaked.

"Did Mikasa just get superpowers?" Connie asked, voice dazed and confused.

"Her muscles!" Sasha cried, arms flailing. "They went—" She spread her arms as far as they could go, eyes wide. "Boom!"

"How is that even possible?" Gunther asked. "I mean, it can't be, right?"

Eld shook his head frantically. "*Can't*," he said. "But the knife handle—" He held up his fist, clenching it as tight as he could. "I mean, there's no way that was real, right?"

"How do you know?" Gunther challenged. "I mean, we've got a kid who can *turn into a Titan* upstairs."

"But that—" Eld shook his head. "It's like someone flipped a switch or something," he said. "Like—like Eren just said 'fight,' and she was suddenly able to."

"Maybe it is?" Gunther threw his hands into the air. "I don't even know at this point."

"No way." Eld shook his head again, firmly and fiercely. "*No way*. 'S impossible." *Though. . .* He frowned. *Not two months ago, we would have said the exact thing about teenagers turning into Titans, wouldn't we?*

Fight! **Her eyes flew open and she surged forwards, floorboards splintering beneath her as she stomped straight through the wood.**

Hange's glasses slid down their nose. They stared at the screen, shocked. *How is that possible?* Their heart was pounding, head spinning. *That kind of strength—and so suddenly? She could hardly stand up on her own a second ago! And now she's breaking knives and stomping through the ground?* They fumbled with their pencil as they began scribbling across the page, paying no mind when their disconnected scribbles spilled across their other notes. *What was that lightning?* they thought frantically. *What did Eren's words have to do with it? And the brain—if whatever just happened was enhancing her physical strength, why was it focusing so much on her brain?* They shook their head. *If I didn't know any better*, they thought, *I'd be tempted to say it's magic*.

She screamed, charging at the man with the speed of a demon, brandishing the knife in front of her. He barely had enough time to look over his shoulder before she reached him and the screen turned black.

The glow of a lantern illuminated the corner of the room where the man was slumped, the knife buried up to its broken handle in his back. "Stabbed through the heart from behind," a man muttered, stepping carefully around the patches and pools of blood on the ground.

She killed him. Krista's eyes widened. *Back during that training exercise, when she attacked that thief*. . . She recalled the brief moment of panic she'd felt when the dark-haired girl had shot down through the trees, blades aimed for the man's neck. She remembered, spurred on by her desperation, shouting for Mikasa to stop. Most of all, she remembered the ice-cold bitterness in her eyes. *I didn't really think she'd actually try to kill him*, she thought. *I thought she was only scaring him. But. . .* She gulped, the sound a loud click in the near-silent room. *Now? I'm not so sure*.

Two Military Policemen stood in the room, blackened by the night, the only visible light coming from the lantern in the taller one's hands. "Those two kids did this?" the younger one asked, gripping the strap of his rifle, eyes wide with shock.

It sounds unbelievable because it is. Levi narrowed his eyes critically at the screen. He knew perfectly well just how hard it was to stab someone in the heart, especially on the first try, and *especially* through the back. *It shouldn't be possible. She'd was an eight-year-old girl who'd just woken up, was in shock, and probably had a concussion. She shouldn't even have had the strength to run, let alone kill a man. Though. . .* The hair on his arms and the back of his neck stood up, skin prickling at the memories of phantom lightning racing through his blood, crackling in his ears and setting every single cell in his body ablaze, burning a never-ending

supply of adrenaline and *fight* into his veins. *She would have stabbed right through his heart* and *lung at that angle*, he thought. *He'd have been dead in seconds. Probably wouldn't have even known what was happening.*

He flexed his fingers, wrapping them around the handle of an imaginary knife. He could see the path it would make in his mind—his arm would draw back, muscles coiling like a snake before he struck, blade an extension of himself as it struck *right there*, breaking through bone and muscle, flesh tearing and blood spurting from the organs' punctured walls. He could see himself (or was it someone else?) darting out of the way, away from the path of the spray of crimson. *To be in total control*. His hand flew open, the hypothetical blade falling from his grip. *To know exactly what to do. To know what is necessary*. His fingers twitched again. *To have fought a thousand battles before your first blood*.

Grisha, Eren, and Mikasa were in the yard outside, gathered around a flickering fire. Grisha knelt in front of Eren on the ground, long since dry of rain, gripping his shoulders, while Mikasa stood to the side, staring at the ground, Grisha's coat wrapped around her.

"Eren," Grisha was saying, "I told you to wait at the foot of the mountain." His voice rose and his hands tightened, clenching around his shoulders. "Do you even understand what you've done here today?"

"I killed unworthy animals," Eren spat, eyes bright with righteous—in his mind—fury. "They just looked like humans."

Reiner couldn't help but shudder uncomfortably at the sight of the wild, fractured light splintered through his eyes. *They just* looked *like humans*. He rubbed absently over the side of his thumb, picking at the nonexistent lines of scars that had never even formed.

Killed like animals slaughtering animals. Eld's hand drifted into his jacket, rubbing the side of his ribcage where the familiar weight of his handles should have been hanging.

He's dangerous, Petra remembered Levi telling them. *He's got a fancy-ass power nobody's ever seen, and he's a short fuse that's constantly on fire. 'Bout as calm as a rabid dog*. She couldn't supress the uneasy shudder that ran through her, making her twitch and shiver edgily. *He sees himself as the judge*, she thought, a hint of guilt and disconcertion gnawing at the edges of her mind, *jury, and executioner. All upheld to the standards of his own ideals*.

"Eren!" Grisha shouted, brow furrowed.

"By the time the Military Police got here, they'd have been long gone." Mikasa stared at the ground, ignoring the discourse next to her as Eren's voice rose. "It would have been too late!"

"As much as I wish this wasn't true, it is," Gunther muttered. "I mean, it's nighttime by now, the rain obviously stopped hours ago, and they only just found the cabin."

"You'd think even the MPs would take something like this a bit more seriously," Oluo growled. "I mean, it's *obvious* that they're about as bright as a bag of rocks when it comes to the *important* business outside the Walls—" Petra rolled her eyes, making jabbering motions

with her hands, "—but this is a kidnapping case with murderers thrown in! Shouldn't they at least look down their swollen noses to try and figure this one out?" Annie scoffed quietly, rolling her eyes.

"It's doesn't matter what might have happened," Grisha growled, glaring at his son. "You were just lucky." Eren clamped his mouth shut, looking, for the first time, worried. "What I'm concerned about," said Grisha, "is how you thoughtlessly risked your life."

"That's it?" Sasha asked quietly, incredulously. *Nothing about the*— she grit her teeth – murders*? Not even anything about stranger danger?*

"Dad of the year, everyone," Ymir drawled under her breath. Krista smacked her arm. "Seriously?" Ymir scoffed. "Even now? Look at the guy—his kid just killed two men, and he's not even telling him why that's a bad thing?"

"I—" Krista faltered. "I'm sure he has his reasons—"

"Yeah? What?" Ymir challenged. "No, please, go on, I'm dying to hear what you've got to say." Krista was silent. "Nothing?" The younger girl didn't meet her eyes. "Thought so," she muttered. "Even you can only be so sanctimonious."

Eren dipped his chin to his chest, tears welling up in his eyes. "But I had to save her," he said quietly, voice shaking.

"This kid. . ." Mike muttered. *One second he's like a rabid animal, ready to rip your throat out, and then, suddenly, he's a sad little kid and all you wanna do is give him a cookie and tell him everything's gonna be alright*. He shook his head. *This is too much for me*.

Grisha jerked, looking almost surprised for a moment before sighing and looking down.

That's it? Petra blinked. The exchange had ended so abruptly she was nearly convinced she'd missed a segment. *He's just gonna leave it like that?*

Grisha Jaeger. Erwin watched the scene carefully, like a hawk tracking its prey, or a chessmaster focused on a board of living, breathing pieces. *He's different*, he thought. *There's just something about him. . . the way he lets go of something like this without even questioning it, even his lack of reaction to his son saying he wanted to leave the Walls—he definitely knows more than he's letting on.* He thought, for a moment, of the golden key that had hung around the doctor's neck, tucked beneath layers of clothing, held as close as it could possibly be. *The literal key to his secrets*, Erwin thought. *That is, if we don't learn them through this, first*.

"Mikasa." Grisha stood, walking up to the girl. "Remember me? We met a few times, before, when you were young."

Mikasa was silent for a moment that seemed to stretch into an eternity, eyes fixed on the dirt beneath Grisha's feet. "Yes, Dr. Jaeger," she finally said, voice dull. Another beat of silence, interrupted only by the crackling of the flames.

I wonder. . . Hange thought. *That lightning thing earlier—what else did it change?* It had sparked over her brain, nearly engulfing it in the eerie green streaks of light. *Her personality?*

Hange frowned. *Is this why she's so pessimistic? Why she's so convinced death is the only constant in life? I mean, some of that obviously came from watching her parents die—Shinganshina too, shit—but could it have been. . .* they tapped their pencil against their chin, *amplified by the whatever-it-was?* They glanced up at Levi. The man hadn't done much since his near-inaudible gasp except for flex his hands. *What do you know?* they wanted to ask. *What is it? And why do you know what it is?*

"Where is it," Mikasa asked, voice nearly inaudible, "that I can go to be home?" The two Jaegers stared at her. "It's cold," Mikasa whispered. "There is," she gripped the edge of Grisha's jacket, pulling it a bit tighter around herself, "nowhere for me to go home to."

Is this why they're so close? Jean felt sickened at himself, felt like kicking himself, beating the rolling sense of jealousy out of the pit of his stomach. *Rose, they're kids. They're—Goddesses, they're* kids*. Actual, honest-to-Walls* kids*.* He gripped his knees, looking down at the ground, lips parting in a small gasp for air. *How can they even keep going on?* he wondered, head spinning. *First this, then Shinganshina and Trost—how can they even trust anyone? How can they look at someone and see them as a friend rather than a threat? How can they even bear to get close to anybody when they've lost everyone they've ever cared about?* He rested his elbows on his knees, gripping his hair. *This—* He squeezed his eyes shut, scowling. *I didn't want to know this shit!* he wanted to yell. *I wanted to get to know them—but not like* this*!* How, he wanted to demand, was he supposed to go back to arguing and picking fights with Eren? How was he supposed to go back to stumbling over his feet and tongue every time Mikasa came near him? How was he even supposed to look either of them in the eye, knowing what they'd gone through—what they'd *done*?

Eren watched her for a moment. Grisha turned as his son walked forwards, unravelling he long red scarf from around his neck. Mikasa's eyes widened as it drifted down to land around her shoulders, draping her in warmth. "You can take this," Eren said quietly, a gentle, melancholy piano melody playing in the background as he wrapped it around her, tossing the end of it over her face when he was done.

Sasha couldn't help letting out a small, watery giggle. "That's not how you wear it," she said, vision swimming from unshed tears.

Eren kept her gaze, a light dusting of pink over his cheeks as it fell to land over her shoulder. "Is it warm?" he asked.

Mikasa slowly looked down, bringing a hand up to pull the scarf closer to her face. "Yes," she said quietly, "it is."

That explains why she's so attached to the damn thing. Gunther scratched the back of his neck. *Still, this feels. . . private*. Seeing the two kids on screen, awkward and blushing, felt completely different from their normal doses of blood and gore. *That was private, but this is just. . .* them*.* He looked away, drumming his fingers against his knee. *Rose, this is weird*.

“Mikasa,” Grisha said, stepping forwards, “how do you feel about coming to live with us?” Mikasa looked up with a small noise of surprise. “There are a lot of things you’ve suffered,” he said, smiling sadly. “What you need is rest.

Mikasa turned to look at Eren. “What’s the problem?” he asked. He reached into Grisha’s jacket, grabbing her sleeve and tugging her forwards. “Let’s hurry up and go.” He glanced over his shoulder. “Back home.”

Mikasa’s eyes widened at the words and she gaped quietly, tears welling up in her eyes. “Okay,” she whispered, the tears breaking free and flowing down her cheeks, cutting through the blood smudged under her eye. “I’ll go home.”

“One thing I don’t understand,” Mike said quietly as the scene faded, “is why Ackerman’s so obsessed with protecting Jaeger. I mean, I can get her having a crush on him after all this, and them being close, but shouldn’t Eren be the one who always feels like he needs to look out for her? Especially with the. . . circumstances?”

“I don’t know,” Hange shrugged. *But something you said*. . . They frowned. *“Obsession.”* They glanced at the screen, then at the stairs on the other side of the room. *Obsession*. . .

A spray of water erupted through the air as a massive foot stomped down in the middle of the street. Mikasa grunted as she shot forwards, cutting through the Titan’s nape. She landed on the roof in a crouch, drenched to the bone, hair and clothes plastered to her skin. She stood, ignoring the way the street shook from the Titan’s body collapsing. *Only the victorious are allowed to live*. She looked down at the scorch-black bodies slumped over the roofs and in the streets, steady towers of steam sizzling and rising up into the air, dissipating as the rain pounded down on them. *A cruel world*.

“Sweet Sina,” Sasha squeaked.

“That’s a lot of bodies,” Moblit muttered. *I know veterans who’ve got body counts lower than what she’s killed today*.

The ringing of the bell cut through the piano’s mournful melody and the drumming of the rain. The Gate ground against the wall as it was lowered, sealing Trost off from the rest of the Walls. “It’s the squadron, Ackerman,” Ian called, landing on the roof next to her. “Let’s scale the Wall.”

“I’ll help the vanguard withdraw,” she shouted back, squinting through the rain streaming down her face.

“She’s gonna go and find Eren, isn’t she?” Connie muttered. Jean nodded, stomach sinking at the memory of what would happen next.

Erwin frowned. *Strength isn’t everything*, he thought. *If she keeps disobeying orders like this, she’ll get more people killed than she can save*.

“Ackerman!” Ian called as she turned, running off the roof and flying away. “Wait!”

She shot through the rain, the droplets peppering her face like tiny bullets, gales tearing at her scarf and cloak. *But in this cruel world, I have a place to go home*. She swerved around a corner, staring ahead through the clouds and darkness. *Eren*, she thought. *As long as you're alive, I can do anything*.

Armin came down the stairs ten minutes after the episode had finished. "Er," he said awkwardly, his tentative voice like the felling of a tree in the heavy forest of silence.

"Hey Armin," said Jean.

"How're. . ?" Sasha nodded at the stairs, brows furrowed.

"They're fine," Armin said. He looked at the empty couch he, Eren, and Mikasa had been sprawled across for a moment before perching himself on the edge of a kitchen stool, hovering and tense, as if ready to take flight at any moment.

"I think we need a break," Eld said, standing up.

"Agreed," Levi muttered. The shocked expression had fallen off his face somewhere in between Mikasa and Grisha's short conversation and the ending sequence, replaced by a scowl that seemed, if possible, even surlier than usual.

Omni glanced up from her rectangle. "Yeah," she muttered. "Yeah, okay." She pressed something on the side of the square and the light its screen had been emitting vanished with a small *click*. She stood and the soldiers followed her lead, muttering quietly to their friends as they stretched, joints popping, muscles aching from being kept still for so long.

"Omni?" Armin asked.

"Hm?" She had drifted over to the bookshelf at some point, but had glanced up at Armin's voice. "What is it?"

"You, uh," he fiddled with his hands, glancing away from her as he spoke, "mentioned something earlier. About messages, left behind from people who'd died."

Omni was silent. Finally, Armin looked up, meeting her gaze with a small cringe. She faced him, silent, the twinkling lights of the stars in her eyes seeming to burn straight through his core. "Yeah?" she said.

"I was wondering if—" he forced himself not to look away from her, scratching at the goosebumps that had spread up his back, down his arms, and on to the backs of his hands. "Can we get them?" he asked. "Please. Eren and Mikasa—" he hesitated. "I think. . . I think they really need it, right now."

Omni's gaze remained fixed on him, still but never frozen, endless and unnerving. "You want to see your grandfather," she said. A statement, not a question. Armin flinched away, cheeks flushing guiltily. "Oh, that's not a bad thing," she said. "Good, in fact. Very good."

Armin hesitated, stalling, before forcing himself to ask: "Can I?"

The tip of Omni's tongue flicked out, wetting her lips. "Not in the way you want to," she said. "But. . . shit, how do I explain this?" She tugged at a strand of deep blue hair, frowning.

“He’ll be talking to you,” she said, “and you’ll see his face, but you won’t be able to talk back. Kinda like the TV, but not really.”

“I don’t care.” Armin’s voice was soft, eyes fixed on the ground. “*Can I*?”

Omni’s eyes narrowed. She sighed, looking away. “Sure, kid,” she muttered, fishing the rectangle out of her pocket and tapping the screen. Armin couldn’t resist glancing over her shoulder, grimacing slightly at the impossibly bright display. “Just give me a moment, okay?”

A smile spread across Armin’s face. “Thank you,” he said.

Omni’s face was stone cold, not a hint of a smile on her lips as she brought the rectangle to her ear. “Don’t thank me,” she muttered. Armin’s smile dropped, staring after her in confusion as she walked away, head bent low as she muttered into the square. “Hey, Aart? I need a favour. . .”

Interlude – 2. Memory Sticks

There was one file in the folder.

Eren moved the mouse around, watching the little point on the screen move, too. The mouse (he still thought it looked more like an arrow, but maybe mice looked different on the Homepage) hovered over the folder for a moment and he glanced down at the alphabet guide he'd been given.

Carla Jaeger.

He took a deep breath and clicked the mouse twice. A small rectangle popped up on the screen and, heart in his throat, he pressed the triangle.

The image began moving. Carla shifted in the chair she sat in.

"Mom," he whispered.

"*Eren*." Carla-on-the-screen smiled. "*I*—" she laughed quietly. "*Well, hello, first of all*." She brushed a strand of hair out of her face. "*I. . .*" she hesitated. "*I don't know how long it's been for you,*" she said. "*Since Shinganshina*." She pursed her lips. "*But, Eren—I'm fine. Really.*"

"Yeah," Eren muttered, throat tight. "Yeah, I know."

She took a deep breath. "*It's funny*." She chuckled. "*I have so many things I want to say to you. I had them all planned out and everything. But now, actually sitting here*. . . *I've got nothing*." She shook her head. "*I want to be there*," she said. "*If I could, I would go right back into that world. But I can't*."

"Yeah," Eren said again. He blinked, rubbing his eyes fiercely. "Yeah, I know."

"*Eren*. . ." Her face grew serious. "*I don't know much,*" she said, "*but they told me—showed me—a bit of—*" she hesitated, "*—a bit of your future. And, Eren—*" Eren's stomach twisted at the sight of the look on her face—sad and hurt and mournful all at once. "*Eren, your life is going to be so hard*," she whispered. "*And I'm so, so sorry.*"

"It's not your fault," he whispered. "It was never your fault." He didn't know what she was talking about, and he knew that she couldn't hear him, but he couldn't stop talking. "Mom. . ."

"*Eren*," she whispered. "*You're—*" she closed her eyes for a second. "*You're going to see some things,*" she said, "*and do some things, and learn some things. Eren*." She leaned forwards. "I don't blame you," she said, and Eren's stomach dropped. "*I don't understand*," she said. "*But I don't blame you. Maybe you have no idea what I'm talking about, and maybe you've already done it. Or maybe you're planning it right now. I just want you to know, either now or when the time comes.*"

"I don't—" He gulped. "I don't know what you're talking about," he whispered plaintively. "Mom, I don't—"

"*There's something else*," Carla said. "*Your father—*" Eren's heart skipped a beat. "*If you're watching this, then the memories might already be coming back*," she said.

"What memories?" Eren whispered. "The forest? But—"

"*Eren*," she said. "*I can't forgive him. But I can understand him. And you probably will, too.*"

"What?" Eren asked, frustration mounting. "Mom, I don't know what you're talking about!"

"*You probably don't know what I'm talking about*," Carla said. "*But when you find out*." She closed her eyes and took a deep breath. "*He did love you*," she said. "*He loved you, and that counts or something.*"

"For *what?*" Eren nearly yelled.

Off-screen, someone muttered something. Carla looked at them. "*Already*?" They muttered and affirmation and she sighed, looking back at the camera. "*I'm out of time*," she said. "*Eren. . .*" She smiled sadly. "*I'm proud of you*," she said. "*Remember that. I'm waiting*," she said. "*And I'll wait for as long as I need to.*" She pressed her fingers to her lips and held them out at him. "*I love you*," she whispered.

The video ended, leaving Eren staring at the still screen.

The door shut quietly behind Erwin. Levi glanced up from the alphabet guide he'd been reading. "What was it?" he asked.

"Like she said." Erwin held out the small, unassuming stick. Levi stared at it. *Like a box of stuff*, Omni had called it. *Big enough to hold anything, but small enough to carry around in your pocket*. "Messages. Videos."

"Huh." Levi looked back down at the alphabet guide, tracing a finger along the curve of the capital D. "Who's was yours from?" He glanced up. "Dead friends? Some grumpy officer telling you to suck it?"

Erwin smiled drily. "Not quite," he said. He waved the stick a bit. "Are you going to take it?"

Levi stared at it for nearly a minute before finally holding his hand out and plucking it from Erwin's hand. He turned it around between two fingers. "How do you use it?" he asked.

"You plug it in," Erwin said. "Into the computer. There's a folder with your name on it, and the videos are inside."

Levi hesitated for a moment, then shook his head. "No."

Erwin kept his gaze locked on his. "Are you sure?"

"Yeah." He turned back to the alphabet guide. "I don't give a shit about the opinions of dead men," he said. "It's the living ones that count."

"We both know that's not true."

Levi scowled. "Fuck you, Eyebrows," he said without passion. And then, just for the heck of it, he wrote that exact phrase on a sheet of paper in English and held it out for Erwin to see.

Erwin chuckled. "Alright," he said. "You've made your point."

“Good.” Levi dropped the paper.

Neither of them mentioned the stick he’d slipped into his pocket.

Ymir played idly with a strand of Krista’s hair, twisting it around her fingers. “How the hell is it so soft?” she demanded, rubbing it between her fingers. “It’s like you’ve got silk tied to your head, or some shit.”

Krista just shrugged, and silence fell once more. Ymir sighed, split the hair into three equal strands, and began braiding them. “So,” she said. “You didn’t get a Stick.”

“No,” Krista agreed.

“Even those three idiots got one,” said Ymir. “And they’ve got the least traumatic backstories of anyone I know.”

“What make you think I have a traumatic backstory?”

Ymir shrugged. “Well, you don’t have a stick, for one.”

“You didn’t get one, either,” said Krista.

“Yeah, well,” Ymir let go of the end of the braid and let it fall over Krista’s shoulders, unravelling. “I don’t have anyone. Didn’t. You know.”

“Hm.” Krista leaned against her shoulder, not looking into her eyes. “Me neither, I guess.”

“Huh.”

They sat in silence for the rest of the break.

Episode – 7. Small Blade: The Struggle for Trost, Part 3

A tall building appeared, bellowing footsteps in the background. A group of soldiers stood inside the building. "Captain, please wait!" A trainee yelled. "If the Titans were to attack here, we wouldn't have enough personnel to hold them off!"

"What's going on?" Gunther frowned. *That's the supply depot, itsn't it?*

"Please, sir. We need you here!" another trainee pleaded. Sweat was running down Woermann's face. A group of soldiers stood behind him, all wearing identical expressions of fear.

Connie let out a garbled noise of frustration, pressing the heels of his hands into his eyes. "Of course."

"Out of my way!" Woermann ordered. "My expertise is needed to help direct the reinforcements."

"Bullshit," Ymir stated calmly.

"Behind the safety of the inner gate, right?" A trainee glowered. Woermann furrowed his eyebrows in anger, the fear in his eyes still evident.

"What a fucking coward," Jean snarled. "Is he seriously just *ditching* them?"

"Seriously, how is this guy still alive?" Eld shook his head. "Didn't any of you report him?"

"Yeah, duh," Ymir scoffed. "Not like it did any good, though. The brass had some bigger problems than a shitty officer to deal with after Trost."

"Titanic ones," Connie muttered. Sasha stifled a snort.

Armin glanced at Eren, a small furrow appearing between his eyebrow, when the boy said nothing in response to the comment. "Eren?"

"Hm?" Eren's brow was furrowed tight, his eyes distant and unfocused as he stared unseeingly at the screen. "Uh, yeah." He blinked and shook his head minutely. "Woermann. Sucks, right?"

"That's it?" he asked, surprised. *I'd have thought he'd be the first one to jump on the bashing bandwagon.*

Eren shrugged. "What else is there to say?"

Armin kept watching him as the chatter died down and all eyes returned to the screen. *He's quiet*, he thought uneasily. He shook his head. *It must be the Memory Sticks*, he told himself. He was still shaken after seeing his grandfather—he couldn't even come close to imagining what Eren felt like.

Still, something niggled at the back of his mind. Every point before now, when one of his parents had appeared on-screen, he'd always looked bittersweetly wistful, or simply mournful. Now, though. . .

The word clawed its way out from the dark recesses of his mind. *Cold*.

“Just what the hell are you implying?” He snapped, “This is a decision based on fundamental principles!” His face grew more furious as his tone increased. “A soldier operates on nothing but his principles!” he yelled, eyes widening.

“Spell that,” Moblit grumbled.

“But if we overcome—” A trainee began.

“That’s enough!” Woermann yelled, unsheathing his sword and pointing it at her. The trainees gasped in horror, staring at the blade mere inches from the young trainee’s face. “Question my orders again and I’ll consider it as contempt and strike you down!” Woermann threatened, his face twisting up comically.

“Son of a bitch!” Petra gasped.

Jean clenched his fists. *How many people would have survived if he hadn’t been so fucking* selfish*?* His nails dug painfully into his palm. “What a piece of shit,” he hissed. “I would’ve just thrown him out of the gatehouse,” he growled. “Old and bitter—a nice snack gift-wrapped for the Titans.”

The look Marco gave him was small and sad. “No you wouldn’t have.”

Jean scoffed, crossing his arms. *No*, he thought, stomach twisting. *I wouldn’t have*. He glared down at his lap, jaw clenched tightly.

What the hell am I turning into?

A wire shot out, attaching itself into a wall. Mikasa flew upwards, landing gracefully on the top of a tower. Rain poured downwards, soaking her hair and cloak. She looked over to see a group of soldiers talking amongst themselves.

***They must have heard the withdrawal signal*, she thought. *So why are they not climbing over the Wall?* She turned around, gasping as she saw the supply building was overrun by Titans.**

“Shit!” Eld’s hand flew up to his mouth. “I read about this,” he muttered, “in the reports.”

“Are they *all* out of gas?” Petra asked, aghast. “Everyone?”

“Just about,” Connie muttered.

Moblit’s stomach sank as he watched a smaller Titan try and crawl up the side of the tower, only to fall off, landing on the ground below with a *thud*.

The scene changed to the inside of the supply building. Tables had been turned over and books were strewn about, having been abandoned. A trainee peered out from the make-shift table shield, staring out the window. She shook in fear as a Titan stared back at her. Its hungry eyes seemed to stare into the depths of her soul.

“They’re just *hiding*,” Sasha stared at the screen. “We’re out of gas, stranded, maybe *dying*, for all they know, and they’re just *hiding*.”

The worst part is that I don't even know if I blame them. Connie flushed at the traitorous thoughts, looking down at his hands. *If I were stuck in there*, he thought, *what would I do?*

His stomach sank when he realized he didn't know.

"We're finished." Tears formed in her eyes as she slipped down. "We're doomed."

"With that attitude?" Mike muttered. "Without a doubt."

Hange sighed, pushing their glasses out of the way to rub at their eyes. "What were you expecting?"

"Honestly?" Mike shrugged. "Nothing, really. Most of 'em were doomed the moment they joined up."

And yet we keep bringing them in anyways. "It's worth it," Erwin said—a simple statement, cold and detached. A fact—nothing more, nothing less.

Levi rolled his head on his shoulders, glancing at him. "You think so?"

Erwin didn't shrug. "It has to be," he said.

Three other trainees sat near her, all but one of them huddled into themselves.

Dumbass brats. Levi had a bit of leather from the couch pinched between his fingers, and he rubbed the blunt edge of his nails over it absently. *Why the hell did they even join*, he though bitterly, *if they can't handle this shit?* He tore his hands away from the leather with a scratching noise that almost sounded like a rip. *Who the hell hands a kid a sword and tells them to fight a war?* He glared at the screen. *What a crock of shit*.

The blonde-haired trainee fiddled with his gun, seemingly apathetic to the horror around him. The trainees cried out as the building shook from the force of the Titans that climbed on top of it.

"What's a gun gonna do against a horde of Titans?" Oluo muttered.

"Oluo." Petra's face was pale and drawn, eyes blank. "Shut up. For once in your life. Just shut up."

"There." The blond trainee finished loading his gun, an unusual smile plastered on his face.

Armin's eyes widened fractionally. *Oh. I see*.

"Come on now. Do you think that's going to be effective?" The trainee beside him asked. The blond trainee stuck the business end of the rifle inside of his mouth, making the other trainees jolt.

Krista whipped her head around, pressing her face into Ymir's shoulder and squeezing her eyes shut, not caring what she looked like to anyone else.

Bang!

Sasha's hand flew to her mouth. Bertolt, face pale, hands shaking clammy with sweat, slowly turned his head to the side, trembling. Reiner closed his eyes, muttering a small curse under his breath.

He pulled the trigger, his blood splashing onto the trainee next to him, who's eyes were wide in shock. The other trainees cried as the camera panned to show a splatter of blood on the books that were behind them.

Moblit let out a breath he'd been holding, closing his eyes. Mike swore silently, scrubbing a hand down his face.

Eld placed a slow, cautious hand on Petra's shoulder. "Are you okay?" he asked.

She let out a nervous, high-pitched giggle, dragging her hands down her cheeks. "Fine," she whispered breathily. "I mean—" She took a deep breath, and he rubbed her back consolingly. "It's not like I've never seen people die before, right?" She cupped her hands over her mouth and breathed out slowly. "It's just—" She shook her head. "I don't know. Dying on the field of battle, that's—Sina, I shouldn't be able to say that's normal, but it *is*. But this—"

Eld stayed silent, letting her finish. "I guess," she whispered, "if you're stuck in a situation, or injured, or something—I've heard people say that it'd be better—that you'd be better off just—" She pursed her lips. "You know." *But it feels different*, she wanted to say. *Dying in battle—it'll come to us all, someday.* Seeing someone trapped in the mouth of a Titan, you couldn't help but watch. But when she'd watched the boy put the end of his rifle in his mouth, all she'd wanted to do was turn away. *It wasn't his fault*, she thought. *It wasn't any of their faults. But still, it just felt*. . . wrong. She squeezed her eyes shut, stomach turning.

Would I? The thought sprang into Sasha's mind, sudden and unbidden. *If I were the one trapped in that room, with Titans on all sides. Would I*. . ? The image drifted to the forefront of her mind, unwelcome and lingering, hovering like a bad smell. It was all too easy to see herself pressing a the barrel of a gun to the roof of her mouth, or pressing the tip of her sword to her chest, or climbing a tree and wrapping her belts around her throat, or—

Could I? She looked down at her hands—strong and rough, calloused and scarred from years of hunting and training, and imagined them turning on their owner. She found herself remembering brave Ilse Langar, the young soldier with the notebook—pressing on, even when all hope was lost, writing down everything even when, quiet literally, in the jaws of death.

It was one thing to imagine, Sasha thought. It was another to actually *do*.

Several trainees stood on top of roofs, looking destitute.

"Hey Jean, what are we going to do?" Connie asked.

"We can't do anything," Jean muttered in reply, his elbows resting on his knees and his head hung low. He lifted his head, running his hand through his hair. "They finally gave us the order to withdraw, but we're out of gas so we can't go over the Wall." His eyes were wide and unseeing, fear and panic evident in them. "I can't believe this is how it's going to end. It's because of those damn cowards!"

"Our class couldn't have been *that* incompetent, right?" Connie asked.

"I don't think competency had anything to do with it," Jean muttered. *We were good, all of us—it's the only reason we made it that far. But, still. . .* He put his face in his hands with a small groan. *I blamed them then, and I blame them now*, he thought. *And, in fifty years, if I'm still alive, I'll probably blame then still. I don't forgive them, and I don't understand them. . . but I think I can get why they did it*. He opened his eyes, staring down at the carpet between his feet. *It doesn't make it okay, though*. He clenched his fists, fingers tightening in his hair. *It'll never be okay*.

Connie turned to look at him. "Do you mean the senior officers? Where are they, did they all die?" he demanded.

"If they all lost their will to fight, I can understand why," Jean spoke dully. "They abandoned their duty to supply us with gas, barricading themselves inside." Two soldiers were shown inside the building, huddled beside abandoned gas tanks. "And of course, Titans have swarmed the place which means we can't get the gas ourselves."

"The way it was set up," Eren said, speaking of his own volition for the first time. "It just wasn't fair. They can talk about 'protecting the Wall' all they want, but, really, weren't they just sticking the officers in places where it was easiest to escape?"

"Makes sense," Ymir grumbled. "I mean, they were the ones who planned the whole thing out. Makes sense for them to give themselves the advantage."

"And plenty of cannon fodder to buy them time," Jean muttered.

"So we have to take the chance!" Connie yelled, "We've got to take on those Titans!" Jean glared at him as he continued to speak. "It amounts to the same thing if we sit around here! The Titans are sure to be here as well! We'll just waste what little we've got if we try to run! Without our mobility, we're completely done for!" He finished as he tapped his gas tanks.

"Wow," Gunther said. "That was. . . surprisingly insightful." Connie puffed up his chest proudly, shooting Jean a smug look. The taller boy rolled his eyes, elbowing him harshly in the side.

"You're using your head for once, Connie," Jean said. "But do you think we have the capacity to pull it off? The veterans in the vanguard force have all been killed. Within our group of rookies, who has the knowledge or experience to lead the attack? I mean, let's assume half our force even survives the initial assault. Then what? The supply room is probably crawling with Titans. I don't see us accomplishing much in there."

"I guess it's hopeless. . ." Connie said. Jean sighed, resting his head in his hand.

"They both make good points," Mike said.

"Yeah," Hange said. "Too bad Jean's being a buzzkill."

"Realistic, you mean," Erwin said. "He makes a good counterargument."

"Yeah," said Levi, "but he'd have to be one lucky bastard to get anyone to follow him after all that depressing bullshit."

“Says Mr. Doom-and-Gloom over here,” Hange said. “Your life motto is ‘take shits and die.’”

“No.” He glowered at them. “My life motto is ‘stab shitty four-eyes and feast on their corpse—’”

“*Okay*,” Moblit said loudly, coughing into his fist.

“God, what a dull life this turned out to be. I never even got to tell her how I feel about her.”

Snickers filled the room and Jean reddened. Mikasa looked down at the floor, toeing the carpet awkwardly. “Oh, yeah,” said Jean, throwing his hands into the air. “Yeah, I’m perfectly okay with being your source of amusement in this trying time.”

“Your sacrifice has been noted, and we thank you for it.” Connie managed to keep a straight face for all of two seconds before dissolving into giggles.

“Come on, guys, we can do it!” Sasha spoke, trying to keep her tone optimistic. “Stand up everyone! If we all work together, we can make this happen. I’ll take the lead!” None of the trainee’s responded to her, all of them looking down with horror-stricken expressions.

“You’re welcome,” Sasha grumbled, crossing her arms.

“Thanks,” said Armin automatically.

“Well it doesn’t help *now*!” Sasha protested.

Sasha glanced over to see Armin, sitting down against the wall. “Armin!” She ran over to him. “Let’s all go—” Her voice faltered when she saw his traumatized expression.

Armin closed his eyes for a fraction of a second, letting out a quiet sigh of relief when nobody said anything. The silence in the room had grown awkward and strained, but no one was speaking, and that was good enough for him.

“Reiner, do we move in?” Annie asked.

“Not yet. We have to let them gather up first.”

Why? Hange frowned. *Why risk a larger gathering of Titans? If they have the gas, why not attack right now?* They tugged on a stray strand of hair. *Is it to avoid being snuck up on?* they wondered. *No—that’s counterproductive. They’d be signing their own death warrants. So why. . .* A thought struck them and their eyes widened. *Unless. . . what if they weren’t planning on taking down the Titans? What if it was something else? Something. . . but what?* They shot a quick, surreptitious glance around the room and, quietly, flipped to a new page, titling it *R.A.B.*

“It’s no use” Marco spoke, “No matter how I think of it, there’s no way we can get out of this town alive.” He looked up, shaking. “It’s as if we must acknowledge the end of our lives, but for what reason are we dying for?”

“Mikasa, weren’t you with the rear guard?”

“Annie!” Mikasa yelled out, running towards her. “I know how bad things have gotten, I know I'm pushing forward my personal concerns, but have you seen Eren’s squad?”

“Some squads made it back, but I don’t know about Eren’s,” she replied.

“I think Armin is over there,” Reiner said, pointing his thumb in the other direction.

“Armin!” Mikasa ran over to him.

“Oh, no,” Krista whispered.

Armin looked away, fiddling with the cuff of his sleeve. *I can’t watch this again*. He bit his lip.

Mikasa!* Armin shook. *I can’t do it. How can I face her? It’s so pointless that I survived. I wish I had died with him instead!

“No fucking chance,” Eren hissed. Armin jumped at the unexpected malice in his voice, turning to stare at him with wide eyes. “You’ve gotta survive,” Eren told him, eyes boring into his. “Okay? I don’t care what anyone else says. You’re important, and you *need* to make it out of here. *Alive*.”

“I—” Armin faltered. Eren’s gaze seemed to burn, and he looked away. “I know,” he said. “I know, Eren, I—”

“No, you don’t.” Eren looked away too, clenching his fists in his lap. “You’re my best friend, okay?” he said. “And I know you’re just saying that to get me to shut up.

“You’ve got a lot to offer,” Eren said. “You’re just as important as any of us—I mean, you’re here, right?” He gestured around the room and chuckled quietly. “Seriously, man.” Eren dropped his arms. “Just. . . I’d miss you,” he said. “If you died.”

Armin chuckled. “Duly noted.”

“Armin,” Mikasa knelt. “Are you hurt? Are you okay?” Armin weakly nodded, not meeting her gaze. She stood up, looking around. “Where is Eren, Armin?

Armin lifted his head to look at her, wide eyes brimmed with tears. Mikasa startled, her own eyes wide and unseeing.

“The members of Trainee Corps Squad 34,” Armin began, tears slipping down his cheeks, “Thomas Wagner, Nac Tius, Milius Zermunsky, Mina Carolina, Eren Jaeger!” Mikasa’s form was reflected in the window behind Armin, her expression shadowed as she listened to his words. “These five died valiantly in the line of duty!”

The trainees stared in shock, sweat dripping down their faces.

“No. . .” Sasha whispered, shaking.

“You didn’t know?” Eld asked.

“I guess. . .” Sasha faltered. “I guess we’d just. . . hoped,” she said, “that he just wasn’t telling us, or that they were off somewhere else.”

Honestly, Jean thought, *I’m not sure what would have been worse. The whole squad being wiped out. . . or* this.

“His whole squad was wiped out?” A trainee said. “The same will happen to us if we try to take on those Titans.”

“I’m sorry, Mikasa. It should have been me that died!” Armin sobbed, head down and his entire form shaking with grief, “I—I, couldn’t do a thing! I’m useless. . .”

"Don't," Mikasa said before Armin could speak. "I—" She turned to him. "We both reacted badly," she said. "I don't blame you for what happened," she said, "and you don't blame me for what happened afterwards, even though it *was* my fault."

"You were grieving," he said quietly, "and you still did better than any of the rest of us could have."

Mikasa shifted her weight, awkward and uncomfortable, before turning back to the screen. *Was I, really?* she wondered. *But*— She closed her eyes and took a deep breath. *It's over now*, she told herself. *There's nothing we can do to change it. Just*— She opened her eyes and fixed the screen with a steely stare. *Get through these*, she told herself. *It'll be over soon*.

"Armin," Mikasa placed her hand over his, making him look up at her. She stared at him, her eyes grey and lifeless as if someone had crushed her soul into pieces. "Calm yourself. We haven't got time for you to get emotional right now."

"Huh?"

She's being logical, Mike thought with a small sniff. *No*. He frowned at the screen. *Her eyes*, he thought. *Anyone else would be screaming. But she's blocked herself off.* It was never a good idea to send a soldier who was dead inside into the field—they tended to forget that they—or anyone else—were alive.

"On your feet." Mikasa pulled Armin to his feet, her voice monotone as she spoke. "Marco." She turned to the person in question. "If we get through the Titans at headquarters, we can refuel our gear and everyone can get over the Wall." Armin watched as she walked through the group of trainees. "Is that correct?"

"I guess so," Marco stuttered, turning his head towards her. "Even with you leading the attack, there's just too many of them".

"I can do it," Mikasa replied. Marco's eyes widened in shock as she whipped her head around, unsheathing her sword from its holster.

"What?"

"Mikasa. . ." Eren trailed off. I *did this to her?* He glanced at the girl out of the corner of his eyes. *Me? Why do I matter so much to her?* He frowned. *Is it just because of what happened when we were kids? But even so, that's. . . I don't even know what it is. It's*—

"Unnatural," Hange muttered, chewing the end of their pencil.

"What?" Moblit whispered.

"It's unnatural," Hange repeated. "Her codepen—no, I'm not even going to say codependence. Her straight-up *dependence* on him is just unnatural."

"She's traumatized," Moblit offered. "And a kid. You can't expect her to act logically."

"That's not it, though," Hange said. "You've seen the episodes, right? You've been right here next to me. In all other situations, she's almost scarily level-headed. But the moment Eren comes into the equation—" They mimed and explosion, throwing their hands to the side and

blowing a raspberry. “Boom. All logic out the window. *Tell* me there’s nothing weird about that.”

Moblit sighed. “I can’t,” he admitted. “But it could be nothing, for all we know. I mean, everyone has their own coping mechanisms, right?”

Yeah. Hange flipped through the cramped pages until they found the one labelled *M.A. And either she doesn’t have any at all*. . . They ran their finger down the page until they found the word they were looking for. *Or this is something else completely.*

They added another arrow pointing to *Eren Jaeger*.

“I’m strong.” She lifted her sword into the air. “I’m stronger than all of you! I’m very strong. I have the ability to slay all of the Titans that block our path, all by myself.” The trainees stared at her, mouths agape in shock and confusion.

“What the hell?” Mike muttered.

“Either you are just not as skilled as I am, or you are all spineless cowards!” She pointed her sword in the direction of the others. “It’s really too bad. All of you just sit on your hands and wait here. Sit here and watch.”

“Wow,” Oluo muttered. “Can someone say—” he swung his arm in an arch in front of him, “—mood swing?”

“That’s not like her,” Gunther muttered. “Is it?”

“Mikasa?” Eren glanced at the girl. She didn’t meet his eyes, gaze fixed on a point somewhere below the edge of the screen, face buried in her scarf.

“Wait, Mikasa. What are you saying?”

“Are you going to take them all out by yourself?”

“There’s no way!”

“Agreed,” Levi muttered. “‘I’m strong,’” he mimicked, “‘stronger than all of you.’ What kind of bullshit is that? Unless she managed to find some gas depot and fill up when we weren’t paying attention, she’s just as low on it as they are. It doesn’t matter how *strong* she is—without mobility, she’ll be slaughtered all the same.”

“That’s if she doesn’t turn into a red splat on the road falling,” Hange muttered, chewing on a fingernail.

“If I can’t beat them, then I die,” she replied, turning away from the others. “But if I win, I live. The only way to win is to fight.” She engaged her gear, flying away from the others, who stood in silence as they watched her leave.

“What the hell, Mikasa?” Eren demanded under his breath. “Are you insane? What are you doing?”

“I wasn’t thinking clearly,” Mikasa muttered. “It’s fine.”

“No, it isn’t fine!” he retorted hotly. “What the *hell*?” he said again, grabbing her shoulders. “You can’t just shut down and march to your own death every time something bad happens! What’s wrong with you?”

"*Eren*." She looked down, shrugging his hands off of her. "It's—" She pursed her lips, hooking a finger into the fold of her scarf and pulling it higher over her face. "It's fine," she said quietly. "I was just caught up in the moment. It's fine."

He didn't let it go. "You?" he asked. "Caught up in the moment? Mikasa, that *never* happens."

"I guess it does." She kept her eyes locked on the wall. "Eren, just watch the episode."

"Mikasa—"

"It's fine."

Eren made a gurgling, hissing noise of frustration, crossing his arms. "Fine," he muttered, turning back to the TV. "See if I care." Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Mikasa flinch. *Well, what am I supposed to do?* he wanted to yell. *You won't talk to me, and you won't explain. Talking to you's like yelling at a wall.* His fists clenched and unclenched and he grit his teeth. *You won't talk to me*, he thought. *Fine.* He glared at the screen as if it had personally offended it—which, at this point, it might as well have. *Guess I'll just have to find out for myself*.

"What's too bad is the way you try to motivate people," Jean said. "That's supposed to help us?" He took out his swords, gritting his teeth. "This is your fault, Eren!" He turned to the others, lifting his sword. "Hey! We weren't taught to let our comrades fight alone!" His voice climbed an octave as he spoke. "You all will really become cowards!" He took off in Mikasa's direction, Connie following behind him.

"I never expected that from him," Reiner said, walking off to follow Jean. Armin wiped his tears with his sleeve, following the others. Marco sighed, before going as well.

"They're all insane," Oluo stated simply. "They're walking into a massacre!"

Petra elbowed him sharply in the ribs. "Lower you voice, idiot," she hissed.

"What?" he protested. "We're all talking, it's not just me! Why're—"

"*Oluo*. No, don't shut your mouth, you'll just bite your tongue off again," she said quickly. "Oluo," she said again. "Walls, you're stupid. There's a dead man in the room, and they're all watching the worst day of their lives play out in front of them." Oluo closed his mouth slowly. She glared at him. "Try not to make it worse for them."

"They're in the Corps," he hissed, though not as loudly as he may have before. "They're soldiers, Petra—you can't keep treating them like glass statues."

She kicked him. "I'm *not*," she said. "I'm just asking you to be less of a *dick*, damnit," she snapped.

"*Fine*," he hissed. "But you can't deny it—there's got to be something wrong with them."

She laughed mirthlessly. "Look around the room," she said drily. "There's something wrong with *all* of us."

"Hey, you cowards!" Sasha yelled. "Weaklings! Idiots!" She engaged her gear, following Jean and the others.

They're crazy! **One trainee thought. "Dammit. All right, let's do this!" The trainees thrust their swords into the air, letting out battle cries as they went along with the rest of the group.**

"At this point," Jean said, "I can't even argue with him." He'd heard the argument amongst the older soldiers—who hadn't? *Trauma*. He scowled at the screen. *I'm not* traumatized*,* he thought. *This isn't trauma. It's just*. . . He wet his lips and crossed his arms. "We're not," he muttered.

"What?" Sasha asked.

Jean scowled. "*Kids*," he said. "Or delicate. Or fragile, or whatever the hell else. This is just—" His scowled deepened and he knocked his heel against the ground in a fit of frustration. "I don't know what the fuck it is," he growled. "It's just. . . something."

Sasha shrugged wordlessly, crossing her arms and leaning against his shoulder. "Something," she agreed with a nod.

Mikasa swiftly flew through the air, slicing the nape of a Titan with ease and efficiency.

"Hurry up! Follow Mikasa!" Jean ordered, "Avoid fighting if you can! Get to headquarters before you run out of gas!"

"Woah, Mikasa is amazing," Connie said, awed as he watched the girl speed through the air far faster than the other trainees. "How is she going so fast?"

"Oh, god," Moblit muttered, dread pooling in the pit of his stomach.

No! **Armin thought, panicked.** ***Mikasa's using too much gas! She will run out right away! It doesn't matter how skilled she is, once we lose mobility, we're done for!***

She's not thinking. Erwin frowned at the screen. *She's moving on autopilot*. His mouth tightened into a thin line. *Does she even know?* he wondered. *That she's fighting herself to death. That she's* leading *the group?*

Mikasa sliced through another Titan's nape, gliding as turned around a corner, shooting herself into the air. ***She's not her composed self! She's suppressing her emotions through physical action! At any second, she could—*** **Armin's eyes widened as Mikasa's gas finally run out, giving one last puff. The girl immediately fell from the sky, coming into impact with a roof and bouncing off it.**

Krista covered her mouth, eyes widening with a gasp.

Ymir winced. "Holy shit."

A shiver ran down Sasha's spine as she watched the limp, lifeless body tumble over the edge of the roof, plummeting to the ground. For a moment, she was reminded of the doll they'd seen the little girl lose during the invasion of Shinganshina—dropped and abandonded, and trampled under hundreds of feet.

"How the hell do you survive that?" Gunther hissed.

"Maybe she didn't," Oluo whispered, face pale.

Eld elbowed him. “She’s *right there*.”

“She’s gotta have bones of steel or something,” Petra muttered. “That’s insane.”

“Mikasa!” Armin screamed in panic, going after her.

“Damn it!” Jean yelled

“Jean, you lead the rest forward!” Connie yelled, “I’m going after Armin!”

“I’ll go too!”

“Don’t be stupid, there are still Titans everywhere! They need your abilities!” Jean grit his teeth as Connie flew off, the screen fading to black as the scene changed.

Mikasa’s stomach suddenly turned. *I didn’t even realize*. She stared at the screen, eyes wide. *They were following me*, she thought, a sense of horror dawning on her slowly. *They expected me to lead them, and I just. . . let them die*. She gulped, looking down at her hands. For the first time in weeks, they were shaking. *What’s wrong with me?* She curled her hands into tight fists, knuckles whitening. *Could they have survived if I’d stayed?* she wondered. *No—some of them were bound to die anyways. But*— She stopped herself.

When did I start thinking like this? she thought. *My whole life, death has been the only constant*, she thought. *But when did I start giving in so easily to it? When did other people’s lives become so meaningless to me?* She felt as though someone were twisting her stomach slowly into tight, intricate knots, and then doing it all over again. *Eren*, she thought. *He matters. I*— She squeezed her eyes shut, stifling a small gasp of pain behind clenched teeth as jolt of pain—like a knife, of a lightning bolt, or a red-hot metal rod—wrenched her out of her thoughts. She forced her eyes open and looked back at the screen, the world spinning around her, hands quivering like dead leaved barely hanging onto a branch in a windstorm.

“Mikasa?” Armin whispered.

“It’s nothing,” she forced herself to say. *It’s nothing*, she thought again. *Nothing.* She clenched her fists. *It doesn’t matter*, she thought. *As long*— She closed her eyes for a fraction of a second. *It’ll be fine. As long as Eren survives. . .*

It was the first time, she realized idly, that she was actually afraid of the war.

Mikasa lay on the tarp of an abandoned shop stand, her arms sprawled out, loosely gripping her swords. *It happened,* she thought, lifting her sword above her. *Why this again? I lost my family again.* She dropped off the sheet, kneeling on the concrete ground. *Do I have to remember that pain and start all over again?*

No time. Levi stared impassively at the screen. “Your strength’s no use if all you’re gonna do with it is sit around and mope,” he said aloud. All eyes turned to him. “It doesn’t matter how you feel,” he continued, ignoring the mix of glares and uncomfortable stares. “You’re alive, and so’s your squad, and that’s all that matters. But if all you’re going to do is stare off sadly into the distance and cry about how depressing your life is, then it doesn’t matter how many Titans you can kill. You’re just a liability.” He turned to look at the girl. She

stared back in a weak imitation of her usual icy glare. “You can’t let one death turn you into a blubbering mess,” he said. “No offense, Eren.” The Shifter did an awkward half-shrugging motion, shimmying furiously. “You talk about survival all the time,” he finished, looking Mikasa dead in the eye. “But you don’t seem to be fighting very hard for it.”

The silence seemed to stretch on for an eternity. Mikasa’s jaw clenched and unclenched, and, finally, she opened her mouth. “Understood,” she said, an indescribably complex and shielded mix of emotion clawing at the walls behind her eyes, “sir.”

Thud. Thud. Thud. **A Titan’s foot came into view, turning the corner to where Mikasa sat, staring unnervingly at the ground. She seemed to not notice the impending danger, simply sitting there.**

I can’t read her, Reiner thought. *I just can’t. Her relationship with Eren*— He thought back to everything he’d read about the Ackerman clan, everything he’d studied before departing to the island. *It’s impossible to predict. If we take him*, he thought, glancing at the boy in question, *she’ll literally chase us to the ends of the earth to get him back. But if we kill him*. . . He dragged a nail across the palm of his hand, tilting his head thoughtfully. *Well, we can’t, for one. But if we did—would she fight back? Or just lay down and die?* He scowled. *Fuck*. His temples throbbed as he pressed the heels of his hands into his eyes. *Fucking* fuck.

Information Available for Public Disclosure.

Inner Workings of Omni Directional Mobility Gear, Part 1.

Metal wire stored inside two independently turning axles.

Inner Workings of Omni Directional Mobility Gear, Part 2.

The control device functions as a black box. Gas is compressed and pumped into the tank.

It’s no use, we can’t get close at all, **Jean thought as he stared ahead.** ***Unless we don’t mind dying.*** **He snapped out of his thoughts, looking down to see a trainee on the ground, his gas canister having run out.** ***He’s out of gas!*** **Two Titans made their way towards the stranded trainee, who lifted his swords in front of himself, shaking.**

“No! Stay back!’

“Tom, I’ll save you!” Another trainee flew past Jean before the latter could say anything.

Jean grimaced, swearing under his breath.

“Stop! It’s too late!” Jean yelled out, but his effort was in vain. Tom screamed in fear as he was picked up by a Titan.

“Stop!” The trainee yelled out, swords ready to slice. Before he could do anything, he was caught in the hand of another Titan.

"I hate this," Petra muttered.

"Watching it?" Eld asked. "Or just the whole—" he waved a hand at the screen. "You know. That type of situation."

"Yeah."

Tom screamed in terror as he was brought up to the Titan's mouth. Jean stared in horror at the gruesome sight, the trainee's screaming ringing in his ears. *Why couldn't I stop them? If we had stayed together, this never would have happened!* A girl trainee whimpered as she was brought up to a Titan's mouth, both her limbs caught in its grasp. *Do I have what it takes? Do I have it in me to be responsible?*

It's not your fault, Mikasa wanted to tell him. *But who's is it?* she imagined him shooting back.

Mine? She faltered, staring at the screen.

"No! No!" The trainee screamed out as they were eaten. Jean closed his eyes, as the screaming continued around them.

Mikasa's blades broke as she put them away. *This world is cruel.* A memory of Eren wrapping the scarf around her flashed through her mind. *But it's also very beautiful*. Mikasa looked up emptily as the Titan came closer. *It was a good life.* The Titan reached out towards her.

Something within Mikasa screamed at her. Without realizing it, she sliced the Titan's fingers.

"Jeez," Ymir muttered.

"What?" she breathed out, seeming unaware of her actions. The Titan's hand came down, sending her flying into the wall. *Why?* Another swipe came down, sending her rolling on the ground. *I thought I gave up. Why do I keep getting up?* She stared at a lone pomegranate on the ground.

The sight of the pomegranate, inexplicably, made Sasha chuckle. Jean turned to stare at her, his arched eyebrow making it clear what he thought of her mental state. "I'm not crazy," she defended herself. "It's just—" She shrugged. "There are giant, man-eating, naked, dickless humans attacking Trost. We're being massacred. And, in the middle of all that. . ." She waved her hand at the screen. "Pomegranate."

Jean shook his head bemusedly. "I don't get it," he said. "You damn foodie."

She giggled faintly. "Me neither," she admitted. "It's just. . ." She shrugged. "I don't know. It feels wrong to say 'funny' right now, but. . . I guess it kind of is, sort of."

***Why am I struggling? I mean, I've lost all reasons to live, so for what reason?* Mikasa slowly got up. *I have no reason to be alive*.**

"That's not true, Mikasa," Armin whispered. "Right?"

"Armin. . ." She closed her eyes and exhaled slowly. "I don't know," she admitted in a whisper. "I'm sorry. I really don't know."

The Titan came towards her once. "What is making me…?" Mikasa slowly backed up, turning around to see another Titan coming towards them.

Fight!* Eren's voice rang in her head. *Fight! Fight!

"Eren. . ."

Fight! You must fight! Fight! Fight!

"I'm so sorry, Eren." Mikasa's eyes widened, life suddenly returning to them. *I won't give up!* Tears rolled down her face as a flashback of Eren's sleeping face came to her. *I'll never give up! Because If I die, I won't be able to have these memories! So I'll do whatever it takes to win!* Mikasa gripped her blade, clenching her teeth. *I'll do whatever it takes to live!* She let out a battle cry, getting ready to attack.

"Mikasa. . ." Eren trailed off, rubbing his face. "*Rose*, that's not what I meant. I can't be your reason for living, Mikasa," he said. "You can't put that on me."

"I'm not."

"Yes you are!" he exclaimed. "You thought I was dead, and, suddenly, you're acting like you want to follow me—"

"You're reckless, Eren," Mikasa interrupted. "You get over-emotional, and—"

"You want to talk about emotions?" he hissed. "Seriously? Because you're repressed ones nearly got you killed!" He waved an arm at the screen. "I want you to fight, Mikasa," he said. "I want you to fight to live, but I don't want you to fight to live for *me*. I can't—" He squeezed his eyes shut. "You can't make me responsible for that," he said.

"Your mother told me to protect you," said Mikasa.

"What does that even have to do with this?" Eren whisper-shouted. "And, besides," he cut her off before she could speak, "I don't *need* you to protect me." She flinched as if slapped. "I'm a big, strong, Titan, remember?" he said.

She didn't respond.

A giant foot stomped behind, sending her flying across the ground. The Titan behind her came forward, punching the other Titan and sending it flying as well.

"Holy *shit*!" Connie yelled.

"Is that who I think it is?" Sasha gasped, leaning forwards in her seat. Eren shot Mikasa an "I-told-you-so" look. She didn't meet his eyes.

"What was that?" Mikasa looked up in shock at her saviour. Approximately fifteen meters tall and pure muscle, shaggy hair framed the Titan's face.

Annie leaned forwards. *There it is*.

"The Founder," Bertolt whispered reverently.

The Titan opened its mouth in a gentle hiss, before throwing its head back in a rage-induced roar.

Hange let out a high-pitched screech, throwing their hands into the air. "*Eren!*" they screamed. "*Oh*, look at you! It's beautiful!" They let out a series of high-pitched cackles. "Draw

it, Moblit!" they ordered. "Draw it, draw it, draw it!" They grabbed onto Levi's leg, shaking it frantically. "Do you see this, Captain?" they yelled. "This! *This*!"

"Oh, my god." Levi yanked his leg away, but not before aiming a sharp kick at their shoulder. "You're psychotic."

Mikasa covered her ears from the deafening sound. The Titan raised its foot, bringing it down again on the other Titan. It furiously stomped repeatedly as Mikasa watched.

That Titan. . .* Mikasa stared in shock, *is killing another Titan!

"The rage!" Hange hollered. "The fury! Yes!" They jabbed their pencil in the air like a sword. "*Yes*!"

"Drool on my boot, and I'll kill you!"

***Come on Mikasa, please be alright!* The Rogue Titan let out a roar, prompting Armin to look in the direction of the sound. He noticed Mikasa down below him. "Mikasa!" Armin swooped down, snatching Mikasa from the ground. He brought them both up, landing on a nearby roof. "Mikasa, are you okay?"**

"Are you guys alright?" Connie landed next to them.

"Yeah."

"Let's get out of here!" Connie glanced over, "Damn, two 15-metre Titans!"

"No. That one's different," Mikasa said.

"No kidding," Jean muttered, gooseflesh prickling on his arms.

The Rogue Titan stepped forward, letting out a roar. The other Titan roared in response, charging towards the Rogue. The Rogue Titan put its arms up in an offence position. The Rogue Titan threw a powerful punch at the other, sending its head flying where it crashed into a tower. The Rogue Titan turned to look at its hand, watching it heal as bone and muscle spun together like thread. The headless Titan tried to lift itself from the ground but was immediately killed as the Rogue brought its foot down onto its nape.

"Looking at it now, it's stupidly easy to guess who it is," said Ymir. *It's got Eren written all over it. Furious, bloodthirsty*. . . She shuddered. *And utterly remorseless*.

"It finished it off!" Armin said in disbelief. "Did it know where it's weak spot was?"

"We have to move, guys!" Connie urged. "Before it comes our way!"

"No. He has no reaction to us. Any other Titan would have been onto us."

"It seemed to understand the skill of hand-to-hand combat," Mikasa said. "What is that thing?"

"We should have guessed it from the start," Connie groaned, smacking the side of his head. "Sina, we're idiots."

"Nah," said Sasha. "I mean, you are an idiot—" Connie stuck his tongue out at her, "—but who could have guessed that humans could have turned into Titans?" She snorted. "I mean, yeah, we kinda look the same, but that's where it stops."

"Guess so."

"Just chalk it up as another Abnormal! There's so much we don't know," Connie said. "Forget about it. Let's get out of here!"

"Wait a minute! Mikasa's tanks are empty!"

"What, are you serious? What are we going to do without you?"

"There's only one thing we can do." Armin took out his canister. "There isn't very much left in mine, hurry and switch it with yours."

"Armin!"

"Armin!" Eren yelled at the same time. "That's suicide!"

"This is our only choice!" he said. "It'll be a complete waste if I keep them, but use this gas more sparingly, so you can save everyone"."

Mikasa stared at Armin in shock, mouth agape. *I led the attack without any regard for their lives at all and before I realized that responsibility, I was even reckless with my own life. All because of my personal circumstances, I. . .*

At least she realizes it, Erwin thought. *But knowing something and actually doing it are two very different things*.

"There, it works!" Armin said, snapping Mikasa out of her thoughts. "I also restocked your blades, just leave me this one." He pulled out a broken blade, staring at it with wide eyes. "If I can, I want to avoid being eaten." Mikasa took the blade from him, tossing it away. Armin stared at her in disbelief. "Why did you—"

"Armin," Mikasa took his hand into her own. "I will not leave you behind." She helped him to his feet. She turned away, staring ahead into the distance. *That moment, I was so bewildered. I've never heard of a Titan killing another Titan, but it faintly made sense to me. What I saw was an embodiment of humanity's rage.*

Episode – 8. I Can Hear His Heartbeat: The Struggle for Trost, Part 4

“But Titans are everywhere! You can’t jump and carry me on your back at the same—”

“Come on, let’s move.” Connie grabbed Armin’s hand.

Their loyalty to each other is admirable, thought Erwin. *I know too many people who’d have turned and left before Armin had even made the suggestion*.

“Makes you wonder,” commented Levi.

“Wonder what?”

The other man shrugged. “Look at them,” he said. “They’re in hell, almost literally, and they’re still sticking their necks out for their friends. So,” he said, “I’m wondering what it would take to make them leave each other behind.”

“I can only pray we’ll never have to find out.”

Levi snorted.

Please, don’t do this. It’s not going to work, **Armin thought as he watched his friends run ahead.** ***Enough people have died on my account!*** **He looked back as the Rogue let out another roar.** ***No!*** **He pulled his arm back. “Wait! I’ve got an idea!”**

“What is it, then?” Connie asked.

“Only you two are capable of pulling this off, so it’s your choice. This might sound crazy, but I think he might be useful!”

“You mean the Titan?”

“We seriously lucked out,” said Jean. “I mean, what if it’d just been another weird Abnormal? What then?”

“We’d be dead either way,” said Sasha with a shrug.

Connie couldn’t help holding back a shudder as, for the first time since that day, he let himself think about what *could* have happened. Images of bloody streets and dismembered bodies tossed around like ragdolls flashed through his mind, and he shook his head to clear it.

“He only attacks his own kind, but shows no interest in us!” said Armin. “What if we lead him to HQ and let him loose on the Titans there? Look, we know he’s already taken one out, we can use him as a weapon!”

“I’m curious,” said Reiner suddenly. “If it—the Titan—hadn’t turned out to be Eren, what would you guys have thought? I mean, what explanation would you have come up with?”

“Doesn’t matter, does it?” said Gunther. “Why’d we waste time hypothesising about that when we already know the answer?”

“Do we, though?” Hange hummed, rolling their pencil between their palms. “I mean, we know the basics—the bare, *bare* basics. But that’s hardly a solid explanation.”

“We already knew talking Titans were a thing,” said Moblit. “Honestly, I’d have just thought it was another Abnormal and be done with it.”

Just another Abnormal. Eren furrowed his brow, staring down at his hands. *If my Titan hadn't died when it did. . .* he turned his hand over, palm down, *would they have just cut me down? Or would they have handed me over to the Corps? The Military Police?* He frowned, staring at the side of his thumb. The skin tingled with the memory of teeth breaking skin and sinking into flesh. *Would they?*

"You have got to be kidding!" Connie said. "How the hell are we supposed to steer that thing?"

"Well, something tells me he's fighting on instinct," Armin answered. "I'm almost sure if you take down the pair he's tangling with now, he'll look for others which will lead him straight to HQ. We're not steering him as much as he is himself. I think this'll work, I really do."

"Solid plan," said Mike, "considering what you were working with."

"Like building ODM out of sticks and glue," offered Moblit.

Armin flushed, looking down, and Eren grinned, nudging him lightly in the side with his elbow.

"You're telling us to risk our necks on a stupid gut feeling?"

"If I'm right about this, we can put down the siege on HQ in one fell swoop!" Armin reasoned.

And if he wasn't right. . . Jean drummed his fingers on the armrest of the couch. *What? What then?* He glanced around the room. *We're all here*, he thought, *because someone thought we were important*. He frowned. *Important. What the hell does that even mean? That we're the linchpins to this? To saving the world?* His frown deepened and he crossed his arms. *Then what does* that *mean? Are we important enough to the fucker that built this world that we won't die? Is that it?* There was a dull, stinging pain in his arms and he realized, belatedly, that he was digging his nails into his skin. He quickly loosened his grip. *And then what* then*? Is that it? We're functionally immortal, or something?* He clenched his fists. *So all of that—all the fear, the things we did—it was for nothing? We'd have survived no matter what? Or*, he pursed his lips, *did we* have *to feel that? To survive?*

Jean scowled, ruffling a hand roughly through his hair. "What?" asked Sasha.

Jean snorted. "Existentialism," he grunted. "Bullshit. You know."

"It's worth a shot," Mikasa spoke.

"Huh? Seriously?" Connie asked.

"Better to take a gamble on Armin's gut feeling than wait around to be slaughtered. If there's a decent shot, why not take it?"

"You trusted me that much?" asked Armin quietly.

"Yes," Mikasa said. One word, three letters, a single syllable. "Yes, I do."

"Why?" Armin couldn't help asking. "Did you really think it was a decent shot?"

"I trusted you," said Mikasa, "and that was enough."

“So basically, we’re going to recruit a Titan?” Connie demanded.

“Yes, exactly,” Mikasa replied.

“We’ll look like morons if we screw this up.” Connie grinned nervously.

“Yeah, but if we succeed, think of how many lives will be saved,” Armin said.

“When there’s a will, there’s a way,” Mikasa remarked. She set off, Armin following.

“It’s nuts, but what the hell!” Connie said, running after them.

“Oh, goody,” drawled Ymir. “You’re all insane.”

“Man, shut up,” grumbled Connie, cheeks flushing as he crossed his arms.

***Why couldn’t I stop them? I’m the last person who should have been given the reigns!* Jean thought. He watched the grizzly scene unfold in front of him as he squeezed his eyes shut.**

Maybe, thought Erwin, *and maybe not*. He snuck a glance behind him. The long-faced boy was staring at the TV, an almost furious look of fiery intensity etched onto his face. He recognized the look; he’d seen it plenty of times in the mirror before. Oh, not recently, of course—there was no way he could risk being so open anymore. But, years ago, when he was the same age? Definitely. *What are you thinking?* he wondered. *What did you realize?*

***No!* Jean’s eyes snapped open. *This is our chance. We can get the drop on them while they’re preoccupied. It’s perfect!* He looked down, sweating dripping down his face. “Let’s go! Make a break for HQ while they’re distracted!”**

Not bad. Mike’s fingers tapped a rhythmic tattoo against his knee. *The kid’s something, that’s for sure—they all are*. He went over what he’d picked up from the boy during the past few hours: jealousy, inferiority, determination, *attitude*, prickles like a cactus, and, most curious of all, *changeability*. *He’s different*, he thought, *right now, sitting behind me, from the Jean we’re watching right now*.

The others followed him, holding their swords. *We can do this! Hey, if we run out of gas, we’re dead anyway!* “Give it everything you got!” Jean and the trainees jumped from roof to roof.

“He’s a leader,” said Erwin. “Or he can be, at least.”

“When he’s backed up against a wall, maybe,” said Levi. “Whatever potential he’s got’s no use if he’s more worried about how he looks when he lands than whether or not he’ll be able to do it without breaking a bone.”

“Maybe,” said Erwin. *We’ll get there*. He looked back at the screen. *We’ll get there*.

Mikasa sliced the nape of a Titan as Connie flew behind her, carrying Armin.

He’s strong, thought Eld, with no little amount of surprise. *I guess I shouldn’t be surprised, considering his ranking, but still*. . . He scratched his ear. “The top ten,” he said, “including a dead kid—” and *Rose*, did it feel weird to say that, “—and two of their friends. What’s their deal?”

The Rogue battled with another Titan, pushing it into a building before punching it repeatedly.

The group flew through the Titans, dodging them with ease. The Titan got ahold of Jean's leg in its grasp. Jean swiftly cut off the finger, shooting off forwards. He landed on the roof, teeth grit. Marco caught up to him, running alongside him.

"Jean!"

"Huh?"

"You really came through for us there, man. We owe you big time!" Marco remarked, grinning.

"Huh?" Jean stared at him.

Hange felt very much like doing the same thing. "Why him?" they wondered.

"What?" asked Moblit.

"Why him?" Hange repeated. "Look at them," they said, pointing a thumb over their shoulder. "All of them—they've all got a role to play in this. I'm not sure *what*, exactly—honestly, I wouldn't have even noticed them when we first started watching this if it weren't for the fact that they were here, with us—but they're definitely meant to do *something*. But why Marco?" They gestured at the screen. "I mean, he shouldn't be watching this with us. He wasn't supposed to, but he's here. So why do I keep getting the feeling that he's important?"

"Don't shrug it off, I'm serious," Marco said. "We're alive because of you! As I said, you're a great leader! Easy with that crap!"

A good leader, thought Erwin. *Not great. Not yet*. He'd heard Hange's rant (he didn't think there was anybody in the room that *hadn't*, and he was pretty sure that, if he turned around right now, both Jean and Marco would have distinctly uncomfortable looks on their faces), and he couldn't help but agree. *He's supportive*, he thought. *A friend, maybe more. But it can't* just *be that, can it?*

Jean returned the grin, before looking ahead. "We're not out of this yet!" He yelled as he flew through a few titans. One trainee got caught by one, blood spurting as he cried out. Jean looked back briefly, horrified. "Dammit!" He forced himself to look ahead, gritting his teeth.

Reaching the supply building, Jean angled his body forty-five degrees, crashing through the glass. The others followed, shards of glass scattering throughout the floor.

Gunther winced empathetically. "Ow," he muttered. "Shit, these kids. . ."

***How many—how many of us made it?* Jean thought, putting his hand to his head. *How many bodies did I crawl over? How many of our comrades died on my orders?* Jean looked over beside him, noticing two trainees huddled in fear under the desk.**

"You can't think like that," said Mike.

“What?” Jean blinked up at him. He’d been staring at the ground between his feet, brow furrowed tighter than a noble lady’s corset, fists tightly clenched.

“You can’t think like that,” Mike repeated. “The Titans killed them, not you.”

“But they—”

“They were following you,” said Mike. “Not because you forced them, not because they had to, but because they *chose* to. They’re dead, yes,” he continued, “but you can’t keep carrying that, you hear me? Respect them, and remember them, but you can’t let them drag you down.” At this, Jean swore that his gaze flicked to the Commander. “We chose to be here, each and every one of us,” he said.

Ymir snorted quietly. “If only that were true,” she muttered.

Krista’s fingers flexed minutely on her knee. “I don’t know what you’re talking about,” she muttered.

“What made you think I was talking about you?” Ymir challenged.

“Hold on a sec. . .” Jean said, “You guys with the supply team?”

“Yeah.” Jean reached forward, dragging the trainee out. He swung a punch, knocking him to the ground.

“Woah!” Gunther exclaimed.

“Sina, kid,” Eld muttered. “Can’t say I wouldn’t do the same, though,” he added under his breath.

“Jean, stop!” Marco yelled, running up to restrain Jean.

“You cowards!” Jean shouted, “You left us out there on our own! People are dead because you didn’t have the guts to do your job!”

“The titans were coming at us from every angle!” The trainee cried in return. “They overran the supply room, okay?”

“It’s your job to deal with it and back us up anyway!”

I can’t decide who’s side I’m supposed to be on, thought Sasha, wiping her palms on her legs. *I mean, I was* there*, and I’m still defending them*. She groaned, rubbing her hands over her face. *What does that mean, then?* she wondered. *Am I soft?* she frowned. *And is that really so bad?*

Reiner frowned, watching the scene unfold. He startled when he heard a distant whistling sound. “Hit the deck!” He yelled out. One of the walls were broken down as a Titan’s head appeared outside of it. Trainees were sent flying by the force.

Hange’s eyes widened, and they somehow managing to frown at the same time. *How did he hear that?*

As the dust settled, Jean looked over in horror. “Son of a. . .” he muttered, “There’s too many people! They can smell us!” The trainees broke into panic, all of them desperately trying to get away.

“Can they?” asked Connie.

"What?"

"Smell," Connie said. "I mean, I always assumed that they found humans through looking."

"I don't know," said Hange. "Man!" they complained, flopping against the couch and throwing their arms to the side dramatically. "What I'd give to see through a Titan's eyes." They sighed longingly.

"Eren," said Moblit, "do you remember what it looked like?" he asked. "When you were in your Titan. How did you see?"

Eren shook his head. "Sorry," he said genuinely. "It was like. . ." he frowned. "I don't know what it was like. "I definitely know that I could see, but not much other than that."

"That's helpful," Oluo snorted.

But that's not all, thought Eren as he looked back at the screen, ignoring Oluo's yelp as Petra slapped his shoulder. *I don't remember much that's true. But there* was *something else. Like a feeling. . . nothing to do with humans, I don't think, but it was there. Like I was standing in front of a wall, and I was just too short to not be able to see over it.* He frowned. *So why didn't I tell them that? 'Cause I think I'll sound crazy? No—this would hardly be crazy, compared to what we saw today.* He frowned. *I don't know. I really don't*.

"Run!"

"Get further in!"

"We can't all go at once!"

"Where's Mikasa, have you seen her?"

"She ran out of gas, forget about her! She's dead!"

Connie snorted. "Holy shit, they really thought that?"

But it was too close to being true, thought Mikasa. She frowned, remembering kneeling in that alley. *Why?* she asked herself, realizing, with a start, that it was the first time she had. *Why* do *I feel like this?* She glanced at Eren out of the corner of her eye. He was staring at the TV, transfixed. *Why am I like this?* she wondered. *Why—?*

A bolt of pain ripped through her head and she couldn't hold back a gasp, both hands flying up to grab at her temples. "Mikasa?" Armin asked, alarmed.

She grit her teeth. Her skull was throbbing and she felt like red-hot needles were piercing her brain from all sides. Her ears were ringing, like an army of tiny sprites were marching around in her head, banging every available surface with hammers. Her fingers tightened and, when she opened her mouth to draw breath, she nearly screamed from the feeling that her *head was going to burst open—*

And then, abruptly, it stopped. The pain faded slowly and she let go, slowly lowering her hands back into her lap.

"I'm fine," she said, and she really did sound it. "Just a headache."

Jean stood still in his spot in mute horror. *This is it. . .* he thought *This is reality. Of course it is, how deluded was I? No. No, on some level, I knew all along. I mean, when you stop and think for a second, it's obvious. There's no winning, not against them.* Jean was broken out of his trance as he saw a gigantic fist collide with the Titan's head. A rhythmic heartbeat could be heard in the silence as Jean opened his mouth.

"Perfect timing," Petra whispered, allowing herself a faint smile.

"What?" He shouted, watching the Rogue throw the two Titans down. Jean watched dumbfounded as the Rogue let out a rage-induced roar. "Wha. . . what the. . . my god. . ." Jean was at a loss for words. To his side, Mikasa, Connie and Armin came crashing in through the window, Connie carrying Armin in his arms. "Mikasa, you're—"

"Wow, close one! I was running on fumes!" Connie remarked, knocking on his canister. "We made it here, though! Crazy, but we did it!"

Connie let out a small, breathless laugh. "*Shit*," he said. "Shit!" The events of that day weren't catching up to him, per se (How could they be? That was weeks ago, after all), but hindsight was definitely offering him the, well, *hindsight* he hadn't mere minutes ago. *We were seriously screwed*, he thought, pressing the heels of his hands into his eyes. *The fact that we even managed to get there. . .* shit.

"Am I dreaming this, or what?" Jean spluttered.

"You're a goddamn genius! As far as I'm concerned, your word is law!" Connie said, patting Armin on the back.

"Ow!"

Gunther chuckled. "Kinda remind me of us, don't you think?" he said, waving a hand to gesture at the four on their couch.

"Maybe a bit," said Eld, grinning.

Oluo sniffed loudly. "It'll take them a while yet to get to our—"

"Oluo," Petra interrupted, holding up a hand. "Just. . . don't."

"Check it out, we found an Abnormal that's got a bone to pick with its own kind!" Connie explained, "And the best part? It couldn't care less about us! That's right, you heard me! This big beautiful sonuvabitch is our ticket out of here!"

"No offense, Eren!" Connie called.

"None taken!" Eren shot him a thumbs-up.

"Well I think your Titan is beautiful, Eren!" Hange said loudly, grinning.

"Yes," Levi said. "And it's disturbing as fuck."

"You mean like fighting fire with fire?"

"Listen to yourself, a Titan's not going to help us!" Jean yelled. "You're out of your mind if you think this can work!"

"Works better than what we've been doing up 'till now," said Ymir with a shrug.

“It is working,” Mikasa said. “For whatever reason, he’s rampaging against them. Stand back and let him do it. Trust me, you’ll see. Either way—” outside, the Rogue threw a powerful punch, sending a Titan backwards. It let out a roar, throwing its head back. “—what choice do we have? Right now, he’s our best chance at survival.”

Lucky, thought Jean. *We were so, so lucky. Anything could have happened—Eren could have been eaten, or he could have just been a mindless rage monster from the beginning*. He shuddered at the thought. *Then we* really *would’ve been fucked*.

Information Available for Public Disclosure

Inner Workings of Omni-Directional Mobility Gear Part 3

Driven via gas flow. Output controllable by adjusting gas pressure.

Titan Size Chart

The Rogue Titan looked back, grappling a Titan by its arm and throwing it to the ground, crushing two smaller Titans in the process.

“Look at him! This guy makes other Titans look like total weaklings!” Connie said. The Rogue ran forward, kicking two smaller Titans.

“The way you were fighting,” said Eld. “Those are all basic military moves. Was that just muscle memory, or did you actually know what you were doing?”

“No clue,” Eren confessed. “Maybe a bit of both? Mostly muscle memory, though, I think,” he said.

The elevator came up to where the trainees were standing. “They’re not going to take this building, not with him rampaging out there.” Connie remarked.

“That’s all well and good,” Reiner said. “But what’s keeping him from turning on us once he’s done?”

“We’ll worry about that once we’re safe,” Connie replied.

“What’s with the elevator?” asked Gunther. “I thought the Titans had gotten in.”

“Only into the lowest level,” said Jean. “We were still able to grab some supplies.”

“Yeah, you’re right.”

“Good news! We found some guns, courtesy of the Military Police, although they’re all covered in dust,” Jean announced as he came out of the elevator, holding a long box in his hands. Others were behind him, holding similar boxes.

“Guns?” Moblit echoed, frowning.

“What’re you going to do with guns?” asked Mike.

“Armin,” said Sasha, “came up with this great plan—” She snapped her jaws shut, cheeks slowly colouring.

“Hello?” Mike turned around. “You good, Braus?” he asked, furrowing his brow.

Sasha made a noncommittal squeaking noise and Jean snorted. “You’ll see,” he said.

Jean loaded the gun, looking unsure. “Are you sure buckshot is the way to go?” he asked. “Seems like we might as well throw spit wads.” The trainees loaded their guns. “I mean, are they even effective?” Armin kneeled on the floor, blueprints scattered in front of him.

“I don’t know, but they’re bound to better than nothing,” Armin replied. “We’re looking at seven Titans in the supply room, of the 4-metres tall variety. If we time this perfectly, this much ammo ought to be enough to do the trick.”

Hange’s brow was furrowed tightly in concentration. “Buckshot,” they muttered. “Cadets at HQ. Elevator. . .” They snapped their fingers a few times as they thought. “Oh!” they exclaimed, eyes widening. “The opening!”

“What?”

“In the opening!” said Hange. “You were all in the store, with rifles—”

“Oh, yeah!” said Eld. “That’s this, isn’t it?” he asked. The recruits nodded.

The screen changed to show a display of how Armin’s plan would play out. “*Step one, we lower a group into the area via lift in order to get the Titan’s attention. Step two, when the Titans come within range, the group fires in all four directions simultaneously, blinding them*.” The group listened intently as Armin continued. “Then the hard part. The moment of truth, as it were. Before the Titans have time to recover, seven of us swoop down from the ceiling and strike their vital regions, that’s it. That’s the plan. It puts all of our lives on the line. If we screw up, we’re dead. That’s a hell of a risk for one attack, but it’s our only chance.”

“That’s. . . actually not a bad plan,” said Gunther. “Risky as hell, you’re right, but a heck of a lot better than anything most people could come up with on the spot.”

“It’s ingenious, that’s what it is,” said Eld. “Genius. *Great*.”

Risky is right, thought Erwin. *He wasn’t lying when he said they were dead if they messed up. All it takes is a twitchy finger, or a clumsy foot, and they’d all be wiped out. Did he trust them to do everything right?* he wondered. *Did he trust them not to panic? Still,* he thought, *it sure is something. Reminds me of something I’d come up with*. He smiled faintly.

Mikasa, Bertolt, Reiner, Jean, Annie, Connie, and Sasha’s faces were shown as the screen was divided into seven pieces. “Seven people have to slay seven titans in one blow, at the same time,” Armin said. “We’re gonna need the best of you. The seven most physically gifted and adept with their paring blades. You’ll be the difference between life and death for the rest of us. I’m sorry, that’s it.”

“That’s a lot of pressure,” Moblit commented.

The seven most physically gifted. The words bounced around in Eren’s head and he couldn’t help clenching his fists. He was being childish, he knew, but— *I should’ve been there*, he found himself thinking. *Everyone else was*. He felt, ridiculously, left out. *What the hell is*

wrong with me? he demanded, furious. *It's not a— a* party *or some dumb shit. They could've died. I was outside, holding off the Titans!*

But they didn't know that, another part of his mind, snide and leering, whispered. *They did just as well without you. They didn't need* you—*they needed the Titan*.

He made an incensed, growling noise deep in his throat, nails digging into his palms. Armin shot him an alarmed look. "Eren?" he asked.

He forced a smile on his face. "It's fine," he said. "Don't worry about it."

"Seems like a sound plan," Reiner remarked, smiling.

"When you get right down to it, the risk is the same for everyone, doesn't really matter who goes," Annie said.

"Yeah, but the chances of everyone making it out is significantly higher when the members of the top ten go," Gunther pointed out.

"Look, I—I'm willing to be talked out of this. Our half-baked strategy can't be our only option, right?" Armin muttered.

"Hey, don't be so hard on yourself. Come on, with our situation?" Marco reassured him, "Because, for our only option, it's pretty well thought out. If we give it our all, we just might pull this off!"

"It'll be fine, you've always been good at figuring out solutions, Armin," Mikasa said, "You've even saved me and Eren before with that mind."

"Huh? When?"

"You told Hannes where we were," said Eren. "We all would've been dead if it weren't for you."

Armin flushed looking down. "That was nothing," he muttered. "You probably would've made it out, anyways."

"If we did," said Eren, "there's no way we'd have gotten onto that boat."

"Bu—" Armin's face grew steadily redder. "Well, you guys have saved me far more—"

"That doesn't matter," said Eren. "It's not like we're competing."

"Personally," said Mikasa. "I'd like it if we were never in a situation where we'd have to save each other again."

The three friends shared a small grin, and Eren held up his cookie. "To not dying?" he offered. Mikasa smiled faintly and Armin snorted.

"To not dying," they agreed, holding up their own cookies.

"The lift's ready! So are the guns!" Jean announced, garnering everyone's attention.

"Never mind. We'll talk later."

The seven chosen to take out the Titans walked to their spots.

"Still, can we really take them out without our gear?" Connie asked.

"You've been taking Titans out all day," said Eld, a little bit surprised. "Why are you just now having doubts?"

Connie shrugged awkwardly, rubbing his arms. "Well," he said, "that was out in the streets. Open spaces, you know? Down there, if I was careless with my anchors, I could end up shooting someone in the face. Plus," he added hastily, "I didn't have that much pressure earlier!"

"Sorry," Armin muttered.

"What?" asked Connie, distracted. "Oh, shit, Armin, not that it's your fault."

"Sure we can, they're only of the four metre variety!"

"Regardless of their size, their weak spot is still the nape!" Jean said.

"One meter high and ten centimetres across!" Sasha said.

"You can shove this up their asses!" Reiner said. "Those are their two weak spots!"

"What," Petra deadpanned. Ymir threw her head back, howling with laughter. Levi snorted under his breath.

"Good God." Moblit looked torn between scandalization and horror—perhaps a mix of both.

"I never knew about that one!" Connie remarked.

"I'm only hearing about this now, too!" Sasha exclaimed.

"You *believed* him?" Ymir screeched, slapping her knee. "Holy *shit*, you're idiots!"

"Reiner, those could end up being your last words." Jean muttered, not amused by the joke.

"And I wouldn't regret it a bit," said Reiner, crossing his arms with a grin.

The elevator lowered down to the supply room. "Good, they haven't increased." They all loaded their guns, getting them ready. A Titan passed by, stopping to turn towards them.

"Steady" Marco whispered. One of the trainees whimpered as the Titan gazed eerily at them, a grin on its face. The Titan came closer. "Almost." The Titan was merely inches away from them.

Shit. Gunther wiped sweaty palms on his pants. "This is ridiculous," he muttered. "The tension's killing me.

"Fire!" All of them rapidly fired at the Titans, almost in perfect unison.

A few people jumped at the sudden explosion of noise. "I'm surprised none of you went deaf from that," said Mike, wincing as he rubbed his ears.

The other seven charged, jumping from the beams. Mikasa sliced the nape of her target, looking around.

***Got it!* She thought, "How are you guys?" Sasha and Connie missed their targets, tumbling to the ground. Sasha's target gazed at her, an almost angry look on its face.**

Armin gasped quietly. "Oh, my god," he said. "I didn't recognize it back then—"

"That's the Titan that killed Mina," whispered Sasha.

Eren glared at the screen. The Titan's face, with its massive eyes and pudgy, pinched features glared back. *You bastard,* he thought. *You bastard. You* fucking—

You bastard!

The disembodied voice echoed in his head and he gasped quietly. The Titan's face swam in front of his eyes and, for a moment, it changed—the same, but. . . different.

Human.

He inhaled sharply, eyes widening, and the mirage-like image vanished. "Eren?" Mikasa asked.

"Uh—" Eren shook his head. "No," he said. "No, no. It's fine." He gulped, running a shaking hand through his hair. "Just—" He leaned forwards, snatching a slice of toasted bread, covered in cheese, from the table. "Bit hungry," he said, taking a large, exaggerated bite. "That's all."

"Eren—"

"I'm *fine*, Mikasa," he said shortly. She hesitated, then, still sneaking glances at him, turned back to face the screen.

"I—Uh. . . I'm sorry. I didn't. . ." Sasha whimpered, backing away.

"Oh crap!" Connie hissed.

"I didn't mean to sneak up on you!" Sasha cried.

Sasha groaned, burying her face in her hands. Connie patted her on the shoulder, his own face the colour of a tomato.

"Sasha and Connie!" Bertolt yelled.

"Lead 'em the hell back!" Jean ordered.

"I'm sorry!" Sasha cried out as the Titan came closer. It lunged at her and she dodged with a scream. In a flash, Mikasa came down, slicing the Titan's nape. Annie came down as well, killing the Titan Connie was meant to take out, which had the latter backed up against a pillar. "Mikasa! You saved my life!" Sasha sobbed.

"Are you okay?" Mikasa asked.

"Because of you I am!"

"Then get up!"

"I owe you one" Connie thanked.

"No worries," Annie replied.

"Wow. By the skin of your teeth," Reiner said. "You're damn lucky you didn't end up worse off."

"Yeah," said Reiner. "It almost had you there."

"It was fine," said Annie, voice carefully measured and cool. "I'm fine."

"They're all dead!" Jean announced, "Start loading up supplies!"

"It worked!" Armin grinned.

Marco sighed in relief, before almost fainting as the others caught him, smiles on their faces.

"We're going to live! Thank you, crazy-berserker Titan!" the trainees rejoiced as they all replenished their gas tanks.

Eren snorted as Sasha and Connie clapped along with the people on screen. *Wish everybody felt this way about it*, he thought with a small grimace.

"I caved, in front of the whole gang," Sasha whimpered as she refilled her gas tank. "I'm never going to be able to face any of 'em again!"

"Dammit, feel sorry for yourself later!" Connie reprimanded. "Focus on escape!"

"You two," Gunther snorted.

"Buncha nutjobs," Jean muttered.

"Ah!" said Connie. "But you're here too, Jean."

"Which makes you nutjob by association!" Sasha grinned, looping an arm around Jean's shoulders with a grin.

"Get off me, Potato Girl!"

Jean sat beside Marco, both of them filling their gas canisters. "Listen man. What you said about me being a leader and all. Don't talk to me like that again, all right?" Jean asked.

"Promise me you're not going to take this the wrong way," Marco began, "but I don't think you're a good leader because you're strong. I think you're a good leader 'cause you know what it's like to be weak. You're one of us—you're scared out of your mind just like we all are. It makes you alert, sympathetic." Jean looked over at him in surprise. "You made a damn good call out there. Got me running for my life, you're why I can say this."

"Do you remember this?" Jean asked quietly, not meeting Marco's eyes.

"Are you asking if I've changed my mind?" asked Marco and, before Jean could say anything else, "Because it's no to both." Jean glanced at him, and he smiled back.

"Ready, people, let's leave!" Jean said, as the trainees made their way out.

"Let's move out, everyone!"

"Go, go, go!"

"Let's rendezvous with the main unit!"

As Armin was leaving, he noticed Mikasa on the roof.

"Mikasa?" he wondered aloud as he made his way towards her, the others following behind. "What are you doing? We have to leave!"

"Look. Down there," she said, turning Armin's attention to the scene before them. Multiple titans had the Rogue pinned, chewing at its skin.

Petra held a hand to her mouth, eyes wide. Gunther swallowed a retching noise, skin prickling at the sound of skin and muscle tearing and bones cracking beneath the assault of the other Titans.

“Shit, man,” muttered Jean, face tinged green.

“That’s fucked up,” muttered Mike.

Ymir twitched slightly at the sight, flexing her fingers and tightening them into fists. With each bite, her stomach sank lower and lower, until she was almost certain it was somewhere around the level of her feet.

Another hand found hers. Krista didn’t look at her, or ask what was wrong—just squeezed her hand lightly and let go. Ymir took a deep breath, ruffling her bangs as she breathed out.

“Cannibalism? Can’t it regenerate?”

“I thought if we could find out what’s up with that Titan, it could help us,” Mikasa said.

“I think so too,” Reiner said, “We’ll get nothing out of it if it gets eaten, might as well take out the ones attached to it.”

“You’re probably the only person I’ve ever heard suggest rescuing a Titan,” said Eld. “‘Cept the Squad Leader, of course.”

Reiner shrugged. “It was a spur-of-the-moment thing,” he said. “I don’t know. Maybe I’d make a different choice if I were back there.”

“Have you lost it? We can finally get out of here!”

“But if that Titan were to be our ally, it could prove to be extremely powerful, right?” Annie said.

“An ally? You’ve got to be kidding!”

“I don’t think we’d be able to count the number of people who’ve said that in the past few weeks,” said Mike.

Armin noticed a 15-metre Titan coming towards the scene. “That’s the Titan that ate Thomas!”

“The jumping bitch,” Eren muttered. “I remember.”

The Rogue Titan let a roar, charging towards the Titan, despite the ones that were clinging to him.

Bertolt’s skin prickled with the pain of phantom hooks and anchors digging into his flesh and he shuddered, eyes fixed on one smaller Titan flapping around like a flag as it clung onto the Titan’s leg.

The Rogue lunged forward, biting down on the Abnormal’s neck, picking it up with his mouth.

“Holy shit!” Connie gasped.

The Rogue’s eyes darted over to the Titan coming up to it. It swung the Abnormal down onto it, killing it instantly. The Rogue turned around, smacking another Titan with the Abnormal, sending the former flying into a building.

“Sweet Sina, Rose, Maria and above,” breathed Petra.

“Holy. . .” Jean breathed, “Was that what you were saying?”

“Eating your words, Jean?” Eren goaded.

“Eating the other Titans’ dust, Eren?” Jean shot back.

“I’m sorry, are we watching the same thing right now?”

“Children. . .” Sasha said placatingly, holding up both hands as Connie giggled.

The Rogue dropped the dead Titan from its mouth, letting out a deafening roar, before it collapsed to the ground.

“Did you just. . . die?” asked Eld.

“I think so?” Gunther stared at the screen.

“Honestly, I was expecting a bit more,” muttered Oluo.

“He’s got no arms, Oluo,” said Petra.

“I guess even Titans get worn out,” said Eld.

“Cause I think it’s a moot point now.” Jean turned to leave. “All right, enough of this! Let’s leave while we can! We’re lucky the bastard didn’t get bored or we would have been next on the menu. Look, a Titan’s a Titan. . .” He trailed off when he realized the others hadn’t moved, but had their gaze fixated on something. “What are you looking at?”

I still don’t know whether I’m glad I was wrong, thought Jean, *or wish I was right*.

As the Rogue’s body began to dissolve, a figure was revealed, laying in its nape. The figure peeled itself from the nape, revealing himself to be Eren. Mikasa gasped, shooting her hook and going down towards him.

That’s. . . Eld stared at the boy, slumped in the remains of the body that was once his, steam rising around him. *Unnerving*.

Eren kneeled in the nape, eyes closed and mouth agape. Mikasa ran towards him, desperation clear on her face. She took him into her arms, grasping him tightly. She gasped, placing her head on his chest. Tears welled in her eyes as she heard the gentle, but clear, heartbeat.

The room was silent as they watched. Eren became faintly aware of his heart beating in his chest, just out of sync with the one on screen.

Tha-t—th-thump, tha-t—th-thump, tha-t—th-thump, tha-t—

She gripped Eren tighter, crying her heart out in relief. Tears streamed down her face as everyone watched in shock.

Tah—tha-thump, tha—th-thump, tha—

Armin stared at Eren’s peaceful face. *It’s him. But his arm, his leg. I don’t understand. I watched him get eaten.* He looked down at his arm and leg, clothing torn where the limb had been severed. *I watched him die. I saw. . .* A flashback of Eren reaching out for him appeared before his eyes, tears welling up in them. He took Eren’s hand into his own, letting the tears flow freely. “How is this possible?”

Th—th-thump, th—th-thump, th—

Jean turned around, looking at the aftermath of the scene. The bodies of all the titans were blackened and charred, steaming as they disintegrated.

T—th-thump, t—

“Okay. So, uh… Eren did all this?”

Th-thump.

Episode – 9. Whereabouts of His Left Arm: The Struggle for Trost, Part 5

The scene panned over Trost, smoke rising from various places in the Titan-torn city. "*The attack on Trost left us reeling*," the narrator began. "*Military casualties were profound, owing at least in part to the absence of the Survey Corps, who left that morning on a mission beyond the walls*."

Despite the tension in the room, which Eren doubted even Mikasa would be able to cut, and the awkwardness hanging over him like an angry cloud, Eren perked up. He was still grim—there was no doubt about that—but that didn't stop him from being curious—excited, even—about seeing the Corps in action. He just hoped it would be more uplifting than what they'd seen so far.

The scene changed, showing what the city looked like prior to the invasion.

Feels like it was so long ago. Jean let his gaze bounce over the familiar twists and turns of the streets, and the red-tiled roofs. *Bakery*, he listed, *tailor, shop, school*. . . His gaze lingered on a cluster of buildings near the centre of town. *Home*.

"I almost forgot that it used to look like that," Sasha confessed quietly under breath. "I mean—I know we just saw it, earlier, but, still. . ."

"It's hard to remember good things," said Connie.

Jean scoffed. "Great time to grow a brain, cueball," he said, but his voice lacked the usual scorn.

"Heads up! The main unit of the Scouting Regiment is back!" The citizens cheered as the Survey Corps members came down the city, clad in their green cloaks.

"Their attitudes really did change," said Armin, no small amount of wonder in his voice. "I mean, we were *there*, and it's still hard to believe."

Mike snorted. "The public's attitudes, maybe?"

"What?" Ymir frowned. "The way things've been these years, I'd have thought everyone'd be falling over their own asses trying to please you."

"In a perfect world, maybe." Hange sighed. "'Fraid the government's still giving us shit."

"Why?" Sasha sounded genuinely confused. "I mean, right now's the time when we need the Scouts the most, isn't it?"

"It is," said Moblit. "But not everybody sees it that way."

"They still don't think we're making enough progress," said Petra.

"And what the hell gives them the right to say that?" demanded Eren. "They're not out on the field, they're not fighting. How do they think sitting on their asses helps humanity?"

"I know." Eld grimaced. "But, still. We need cash to fund Expeditions—"

"Which means prancing around like a group of clowns and running to Sina like fucking dogs every time the nobles snap their goddamn fingers," said Levi, scowling.

"I hate to say it," said Gunther, and his expression made it clear that he did, "but if I were a financer, I'd be cautious about investing too much into the Regiment, too."

"Why?" asked Connie.

"Because—" he pursed his lips. "Well. You'll see."

"That's right, Commander Erwin, give those ugly bastards a thrashing!" Eren, Hannah, and Armin watched the scene with wonder, smiles on their faces.

Connie and Sasha clapped enthusiastically along with the civilians on screen. Mike snorted, and rolled his eyes good-naturedly.

"Look, it's Captain Levi! They say he's like an entire brigade unto himself!"

"That's gotta be an exaggeration," said Jean quietly. "Not even Mikasa—" he hesitated. *But the way he took out that talking Titan, in the OVA*. . . He frowned.

"Is he actually?" Armin whispered, leaning closer to Eren.

"He—" Eren hesitated. "Actually, I don't know. We haven't done that much fighting—at least, *I* haven't. Titan training, mostly. But. . ." He thought back to the past few weeks: the reverence in the rest of the squad's voices when they talked to and about him, that lingered even when they were joking or arguing; the way people jumped to obey his orders before he even finished them, and the hush, no matter how minute, that fell over rooms every time his kicked the door open; what he himself had seen so far, both in real life and on the TV. "Yeah. Yeah, I think he is." Mikasa crossed her arms, frowning.

"Just shut up already. . ." Levi muttered, looking disinterested as he watched the crowd cheer.

Ymir raised an eyebrow. "Charming," she drawled.

"Like you haven't already figured that out?" Connie joked.

"That scowl will crush all of your fans," Hange chided playfully, "not that it's any of my business. But from a public relations standpoint, you might wanna lighten up." Levi didn't reply, staring stonily ahead. The Gate was pulled up, light shining through.

"The threshold of Titania!"

Titania? Jean mouthed, face a picture of confusion. Sasha shrugged.

"Ah!" Hange exclaimed. "I remember this! Do you, Levi?"

"I remember holding back the urge to cut your stupid head off," said Levi monotonously.

Hange clucked their tongue. "Rude!"

"Can't you just envision the horrors awaiting us, comrades?"

"Yes." Gunther rolled his eyes.

"God, I knew they were weird, but this is a whole other thing," Ymir muttered, eyeing the bespectacled scientist warily.

Hange spoke with glee, hands clasped in front of them, eyes glittering. "If we bag an Abnormal, I'll cry tears of joy!"

"Seriously?" Connie whispered.

"Was that even a capture mission?" asked Sasha.

"No," Gunther sighed, "it was not."

"I think we've already bagged a crazy Abnormal, right here," Levi said.

"Huh? Where?"

"Right here," Levi grabbed them by their ponytail, turning them to face him.

Jean snorted. "Funny."

"Move out!"

"*The Scout Regiment's primary function is to conduct surveys outside the walls and establish bases of expansion*," the narrator said, "*acting as a spearhead for human knowledge. Thanks to the ingenuity of its exemplary members, the Regiment's survival rates have improved.*"

A few people around the room perked up. "That's great!" Krista exclaimed.

"They called you exemplary!" said Sasha gleefully.

"That said, excursions into long relinquished territory still result in an average death toll of 30%."

The grins dropped.

"Statistically, it's not that bad," Armin attempted. *But, still. . . 30%. In this room alone, that would be*— he glanced around, *god, six people, alone*. He couldn't help but wonder who they would be. He pursed his lips, and looked back at the screen.

A Titan chewed on a soldier, blood covering its mouth and teeth. "*A stark illustration of the disparity between our own strength and that of the Titans*."

"Oh, my god," Krista gasped, hands flying to her mouth. "Is he—he's still alive?"

Connie looked sick. "Oh," Petra said quietly, eyes widening. "This is—"

"One day," the injured soldier wheezed, "one day. . . you'll all just be a bad memory! Mankind will destroy all of you! Mark my words, the last ones standing will be us!" The soldier lifted his sword, jamming it into the Titan's cheek. Big mistake. The Titan bit down harder, making the soldier cry out as blood splattered.

Armin flinched, and Bertolt inhaled audibly. "Why doesn't it just eat him?" Sasha asked, voice barely above a whisper. "What's it doing, playing with its food?"

"Yeah," Connie muttered. His face was a pale shade of green.

"Gorge while you can, bastard," the soldier wheezed. "Just wait until Captain Levi arrives!"

Levi pursed his lips, and his crossed arms tightened. Still, he didn't look away.

"He's optimistic," said Jean quietly. *He's* literally *hanging from the jaws of death, and he still has time to think about hope?*

A wire shot out, latching onto the nearby building. Levi whizzed past, cleanly slicing off the nape of the Titan as the soldier watched in shock.

A few people jumped at the suddenness of the attack, and the fierce guitar riff in its wake.

Levi's knuckles were white. *Still too late*. He scowled.

Finally. Reiner leaned forwards, elbows on his knees. He narrowed his eyes. *Show us what you've got, Captain*.

The Titan fell to the ground as Levi landed on a roof. He looked around, getting his surroundings.

"One on the right," he muttered, "two on the left."

"Captain! The reinforcements are here, sir." Petra swooped in, landing beside Levi, Eld and Gunther seconds behind her.

"Yes!" Eren clenched a fist, hissing triumphantly under his breath. "There they are!" A man was dead—no doubt about that. He didn't like it—no, he *hated* it—but the upbeat, fast-paced music made it impossible *not* to be excited. Excited to see the squad (*his* squad, and he'd be damned if he was still having trouble believing that) that had earned their name as humanity's best in action.

The Special Operations Squad. Reiner furrowed his brow. Levi's *Squad*, he corrected himself, thinking back to what he'd been able to glean about them in the few weeks he'd been a part of the Survey Corps. *Squad Levi. The best of the best—elites in every way, shape, and form. A total kill count exceeding 200*. He glanced at the squad in question, squished onto their couch at the front of the room. Oluo was muttering something under his breath and, as he watched, Gunther scowled and elbowed him in the side. *But, at the end of the day, they're only human. And isn't that just great*.

"Good. Tend to our comrade below, Petra," Levi ordered. "You two, take out the Titan to your right. The pair on the left belong to me."

"Did I hear him right?" Connie asked in disbelief. "He's taking on *two* at once?"

"Why?" Jean asked, flabbergasted. "I mean, why not send them?" *He can't be* that *good, can he?*

"Captain!" Levi ignored Petra and took off, spinning around the roof.

Down below, a Titan opened its jaw, charging towards two soldiers who managed to get out of the way in time. Hange flew around the houses, a wide grin on their face.

"Yahoo!" they whooped, landing on a roof in front of the same Titan. "Don't be scared, big guy!" they shouted, throwing their arms out, as if to embrace it.

"They really are like that all the time, huh?" said Sasha, looking torn between looking horrified and impressed.

"I won't hurt you, cross my heart and hope to die!" The Titan raised its hand, attempting to grab them. Hange flew away in time, laughing as they did. "Points for trying!" they yelled playfully as they came down on the Titan's neck, killing it. They landed on the ground as a soldier watched in awe. "See? Barely felt a thing!"

They almost make it look fun, thought Krista. *No—they make it look* easy.

A different confrontation was taking place on the rooftops. "I know you probably can't help being hideous," Levi said, walking towards the two Titans. He jumped high into the air, spinning as he came down and cut a chunk out of one the Titan's necks.

Mikasa's eyes widened fractionally. *He's spinning*, she thought. *How is he spinning?* She leaned closer to the screen. *His swords!* she realized. *He's holding one backwards—he's turned himself into a wheel.* She leaned back, tilting her head thoughtfully. *Still*, she thought, *managing to go at that speed*. . . She glanced at the short man.

"Woah," Eren breathed.

"That's so cool!" Connie gushed, eyes wide.

He jumped off again, throwing his two blades into the other Titan's eyes. It cried out in pain as Levi landed on top of its head.

"Holy shit!" Jean's jaw dropped. *How did he do that?* he thought. *Did he aim? Or did he just—how did he* do *that?*

"So that's where your blades went," said Erwin.

Levi shrugged, but his movements were stiff—not that most people would have noticed. "It worked, didn't it?"

"Uh-oh, easy big stuff," Levi chided, pulling out his swords. "Otherwise slicing your flesh could be very messy." He brought his swords down, slicing the nape. He somersaulted onto the roof, landing with grace and precision.

They're amazing, thought Krista. *All of them.* She looked down. *They're* heroes.

"They make it look so easy," said Sasha. *They make it look fun. Like it's just a game*. It was a kind of careless playfulness that both scared Sasha and made her envious. There had been a time, she recalled, when she'd been like that. It had been only hours ago that she'd watched herself swing through the practice course back in training, and *god*, did that feel like it was so long ago. Privately, she wondered whether she'd ever be able to be that carefree on a battlefield.

Levi glanced at his sword, seeing the blood that was beginning to evaporate. "Shit," he grumbled. "Disgusting." He pulled out a cloth and began wiping off the blood.

Jean raised his eyebrows. *It would have taken. . . what, five seconds for all of that to evaporate,* he thought. *Says something about his skill—and him—I guess, that he can afford to pause and clean his swords in the middle of an active warzone*.

On the ground, Petra was pressing a cloth to the soldier's wound.

"God," Ymir breathed. *How the hell is he still in one piece?* More blood than she thought any human should have soaked his clothes, and the dirt around him, and Petra's hands had turned crimson.

Annie could see the giant teethmarks that had ripped through the fabric of his jacket and shirt and, beyond that, the glistening pink of torn flesh and splintered white bone. her mouth was sour, and her lips dry, and there was bile in the back of her throat. Still, she couldn't look away, eyes fixed on the screen, almost mesmerized by the macabre scene.

"Captain!" Petra called, eyes brimming with tears. "I can't stop the bleeding!"

Wordlessly, Gunter slung an arm over Petra's shoulder, and Oluo's hand brushed hers.

"Captain Levi. . ." the soldier breathed, voice raspy. Levi knelt down beside him

"I'm here," he said.

Why stop? Mikasa wondered. Everything she'd seen of the man so far—speed and strength, status and callous rudeness, stiff, insincere cordiality, *kicking Eren*—was a contradiction. Try as she might, she couldn't find any words to define him, despite the obvious: short, asshole, *betterwatchhisback*, et cetera. So—*why stop? He's on a roll, and there are more Titans. Why waste time on a dead man when he could save more by ignoring this one?*

"Did I make a difference?" the soldier rasped. "Was I helpful? Please, sir, I don't want to die without helping mankind." He raised his hand, soaked in blood, weakly. Levi grasped it, squeezing tightly.

I thought he hated things being dirty. Jean glanced at the man at the front of the room. All he could see from where he sat was the back of his head—hardly the best indicator for his expression. *But he took his hand anyways*.

"You did a great job today, soldier," said Levi, "and you will keep doing it. Your strength won't die with you. The torch will be carried on by me. This I swear on my very life. The Titans will be eradicated!"

The words, and the true passion behind them, shocked Eren. There was a ringing familiarity in them. They were different people, that was obvious now, more than ever, and their motivations were completely—more or less—different, but Captain Levi's promise was a near-identical mirror of the vow he'd made all those years ago, the ringing mantra he repeated to himself nightly, and echoed in the back of his mind at all hours of the day.

"Captain," Petra whispered, "he's gone. . ." She dipped her head, tears in her eyes.

Oh. Armin knew, logically, that the man was dead. He doubted (or at least, thought) even Eren could survive those injuries. Still, the words came as. . . not a shock, he realized. Not even a jolt. A cold, hard fact. *He's gone*. No music, no view of the sky blurring above him from his perspective, not even at the doomed man drawing his last breath. A stub of information, do with it what you will, stated the way a clerk would list out a month's sales.

A story, thought Armin, *can't always make room for the little people*.

And didn't that just sting. *Little people*. The phrase had such a sneering quality to it—*little people*. It was almost laughable, in a way, because, no matter how much they preached about the individual soldier's worth and contribution, it was becoming clearer than ever to

Armin how much of a willful lie it was. *What does it matter if there's a chip on the cannon if it can still fire?*

He would have been one of the *little people*, Armin more knew than realized. But he wasn't, and he couldn't for the life of him figure out why.

"Did he hear everything?" Levi asked.

What a weird question, thought Connie. *What a weird question for* him *to ask, especially*.

"Yes, sir," Petra replied. "I think he heard all of it. Look at him. That's a face at peace."

"We can hope."

We can. Annie dragged a fingertip over the palm of her hand, prodding at the strange, sticky edges of the band-aid with her nail.

Sometimes, she wished she couldn't heal quite so fast.

"Levi!" Erwin called out, his horse whinnying. "We're pulling out."

"What do you mean?" Levi demanded, leaping to his feet. "You damn well know that we can push further! My men didn't die to pave our retreat!"

Jean's heart sank. In the rush of excitement, he'd almost forgotten what was really happening.

He didn't have to die, thought Annie. *It was useless. Everything they do is so useless*.

"There's a swarm of Titans moving north, bearing on the city," Erwin explained, making everyone stiffen. "It's just like five years ago, something's happening to the city. The wall may have already been reduced to rubble."

That soldier, Bertolt wanted to ask. *What was his name?*

He didn't.

"*Damn you. . .*"

Gunther frowned. *Didn't we see this already?* He glanced around. Eld shrugged, and the looks on the others' faces indicated that they were just as confused as he was.

Armin screamed, reaching out towards Eren.

Armin couldn't help but bite his lips and look away.

"*Damn you. . .*" Teeth closed in on the arm, darkness engulfing the screen.

Eren spared a quick glance down at his hand, then reached for an apple.

Eren slowly opened his eyes, a haze of red surrounding him.

"What?" Hange and Eren asked at the same time.

Eren glanced around, noticing corpses floating around him, some missing limbs. He gasped, backing away. He screamed in terror as he realized he was surrounded by dead bodies.

Krista's hands flew to her mouth, muffling a scream. A cracker fell from Connie's fingers, and Eld all but threw his sandwich back down on the table.

"That's not where I think it is," said Moblit. His hands were shaking his face flushing between green and white, and sweat was beading on his temples. "That's not—it *can't* be."

He whipped his head around when he felt something touch his back. It was another body, staring at him with lifeless eyes. *This—this isn't real! We were ready. We were different from five years ago! We trained hard! We hit the books and learned!*

"I don't remember this." Eren shook his head. "I don't—I don't *remember* this." His hands were shaking, and he felt like he was sinking. Maybe he was. He looked at the screen, and, even though he didn't remember (he didn't, he *didn't*), he could feel the heat (and it was hot, he knew that much) of the confining chamber wrapping around him, dragging him down. He couldn't breathe—his chest was tightening, and he felt like his lungs were full of fire (full of *steam*). "I don't remember this," he gasped.

The Titan that ate Eren peered at Armin, who sat frozen in shock. *So we knew how to beat them and how to survive.*

"It's so hot. . ." a voice whispered behind him. "Mom. . . it's hot." Eren looked over to see a woman, barely alive under the blood.

Hange's fingers fumbled, and their pen fell. They snatched it back up before it hit the ground. *She's not a Titan*. Their writing skittered all over the page as they wrote, eyes fixed on the screen, illegible lines and swooping curves. *She can't be. There's no way. But she's alive. Oh, Sina, she's alive*.

How many? Erwin stared at the screen, eyes wide. *How many survive? How many soldiers survived, only to drown and suffocate in a Titan's stomach?*

"If—" Gunther swallowed and paused, not trusting himself to speak immediately. "If—" he hesitated again, then powered on. "If they had their swords in there. . . or, if there was someone else. . . Do you think— Well, do you think we could get them out? I don't know. . . we could cut open the stomachs? Or they could, from the inside?"

"Look at them," Oluo muttered, and, for once, there wasn't a touch of mockery in his voice. "They're drowning, Gunther. There's not a chance in hell a single one of them could even open their eyes on their own, let alone pick up a sword."

And, besides, even if we could, thought Ymir, *what would be the point? Risk, what, ten lives for the chance of saving one or two? And what happens afterwards? Infection sets in, their flesh eats itself, and they die alone, in pain, and traumatized*. She shook her head. *Kinder to all to let just let them drown*.

Eren's mind flashed back to his own mother hanging sheets on a clothesline, sun shining down on her face.

"*Mom*. . ." Little Eren popped out from behind the sheets, pulling at his cheeks to make a silly face. Carla laughed, hand over her mouth as little Eren beamed. She smiled down at him, golden eyes warm with affection. "*Mom*. . ."

Eren squeezed his eyes shut. *Mom*.

“Mom. . . help,” the woman sobbed before she sunk completely.

What happens to them? Mike wondered. *When the Titans die, what happens to them? Do they vanish, too?* He was sure he’d remember if he’d ever seen half-burnt humans crawling out of their remains. *What happens to them?*

How has it come to this? **Eren watched in horror. *Why has everything been taken from us?* His mother’s death flashed before him. *Our lives.* Little Armin showed Eren his book, beaming with joy and excitement. *Our dreams.* Tears began to flow freely down his cheeks. “Why?” He began to sink into the blood, shaking with grief and anger. “Damn you. Damn you all! I refuse to die like this!”**

Suicidal bastard to the end, thought Sasha. *Except when he says it, he actually means it*.

He raised his arm, now only a stump, yelling in anger. “I’ll drive them all out! Kill them with my bare hands! Do you hear me? With my bare hands!”

A hand shot out of the Titan’s mouth, causing it to fall over.

Connie jumped in his seat, and his mug fell to the ground. “Shit!”

“*Yes*.” Hange leaned forwards, nails digging grooves into their notebook and pen. *But how?*

Something began to push out of its back, ripping apart the flesh as it emerged. The Rogue Titan appeared amidst the steam, throwing its head back in a furious cry. It noticed another Titan from the corner of its eye and began stalking towards it. The small Titan lunged at him but Rogue pierced its fist through the Titan’s mouth. Rogue began to stomp on the Titan, crushing it into a pulp. *More. . . more. . . I wanna kill more! Kill ‘em all!*

Jean felt like a thousand spiders were crawling up his back. *That’s not just anger*, he thought. *That’s. . . I don’t even know what that is, really. ‘Psychotic’ doesn’t feel like enough*.

Unbidden, something prodded at the back of Armin’s mind. *I’m going to give you a little something that will make you forget for the time being*. Like whispers through a fog, the words drifted back to him, and he gasped. *But—*

“I’ll kill all of you. . .” Eren whispered, eyes half-lidded, a lazy, eerie smile—almost a leer—on his face. Armin sat beside him, horror stricken at his friend’s words.

“What was that?” Hange asked. “Just a dream?” There was a barely-audible note of disappointment in their voice, and a greater one of curiosity.

“I don’t think so,” said Eren, trying to chase away the chills that had risen at seeing his own face.

“Eren. . .” Eren’s eyes widened as the realization set in. He gasped when he noticed a squadron of Garrison soldiers, all of them had their swords out and they stared at him with fear.

“Eren?” Mikasa turned back to look at him, a worried look on her face. Her swords were raised, and she stood in front of the boys.

How did they get there? Gunther wondered. *Because they were near the middle of Trost, last time. . . did they drag him there, or something?*

"Are you alright? Can you move?" Armin asked, "Look at me, Eren! Listen! You've got to tell them everything! They'll understand!"

"Armin?"

"You hear that?" one of the soldiers cried out. "He said he'll kill us all!"

"There's not much else you can make of that," another soldier replied. "Son of a bitch wants to eat us!"

"To be fair," said Ymir when Eren scowled. "They haven't got much to work off other than your creepy-ass face and death threats."

"You think I don't know that?" Eren wrinkled his nose. "It's just—" he hesitated. "I don't know."

"It is kind of annoying," said Connie. "I mean, I totally get where they're coming from, but it still feels like too much. But I know what's going on, so maybe that's why."

What the hell are they talking about?* Eren thought. *What is this? Why are their blades pointed at us? Those are meant for taking down Titans! What's happening?* He looked over at Woermann, who looked like he was ready to piss himself. *What's with that look? Are they terrified of me?

Information Available for Public Disclosure

Present Day Scout Regiment, Part One

Search activities are the primary objectives of the Scouting Regiment. However, this has changed since the Fall of Wall Maria.

Information Available for Public Disclosure

Present Day Scout Regiment, Part Two

The regiment now focuses on establishing military strongholds and routes for moving large battalions, in preparation for a second attempt at reclaiming Wall Maria.

The scene panned over to the other side of the wall.

"I want all you cadets on standby. Look sharp!"

The cadets all congregated around, speaking in hushed, tense tones.

"I'm telling you—if we hadn't gotten the gas, we would have never gotten out of Trost," Connie explained, looking down.

"That's true, at least," said Marco. He frowned at the screen. Something was off. . .

"That sounds terrible," Krista said. "I'm so sorry. We volunteered to run supplies out to everyone, but the situation was so bad. . ."

"We'd even found some gas we were gonna dole out to you guys, but. . ."

"That explains it," said Mike. He'd wondered where the others had been during the faceoff in the store.

"So you're saying everyone who isn't here now didn't. . ." Krista began, trailing off.

"Yeah."

"Wait, what about Mikasa?"

"No, she's good," Connie replied. "I thought she made it in after us with the group Jean led."

"Jean, did Mikasa get hurt or something?" Jean didn't reply, staring stonily ahead with the others. His fist was clenched and his entire form was tense.

"You guys didn't see?" Moblit asked.

Connie shook his head. "We were already halfway up the Wall," he said. "We didn't know until the whole thing was over."

"Hey, talk to us?" Connie urged. Jean didn't spare him a second glance, chugging from a waterskin messily.

"I'd tell you if I could, but they've slapped us with a confidentiality order." Jean explained.

Marco realized what was wrong. *I don't remember any of this*. He glanced at Jean, who was determinedly keeping his eyes fixed on the screen. *I'm not here*. He racked his brains, searching, *digging*, trying to remember where he was. *Why can't I remember?* He squeezed his eyes shut, but all he could dredge up were memories of the warehouse, of seeing Eren's Titan, of. . . of. . .

A face, as familiar as his own, screaming, tears, hands pinning him down—

The memory vanished as quick as it came, leaving Marco reeling, blinking away tears, panting and shaking.

"Marco?" He looked up, drawing in a gasp of air. Jean's hand was on his shoulder, and he blinked away the vestiges of panic. "Marco, what's wrong?"

"Just—" Marco blinked once, twice, and shook his head. What had he been doing? "Nothing," he said. "Just forgot to breathe for a second."

"A gag order?"

"That's nuts."

"They're nuts if they think people aren't going to talk" Jean grunted, "Word will get out, and it's for everyone to know. . ." A series of images appeared, showing when the trainees brought Eren in front of the Garrison. Armin and Mikasa held up Eren on their shoulders, his body limply dragging along, the others following along. "Well, that is, if we survive," Jean said.

"What did you think I was gonna do?" Eren asked, though his light tone did little to mask the disgruntlement and mild hurt. "Eat you?"

Jean snorted. “Be real, Jaeger,” he said. “If it were someone else crawling out of that thing, what would you think they were gonna do?”

Eren didn’t say anything, and that was answer enough.

A swarm of Titans gathered together, reaching up for the humans at the top of the Walls.

“You’ve got to hand it to the Engineering Corps for putting the heap of rancid Titan corpses to good use,” Hannes said.

“God, that’s disgusting,” Ymir muttered. *Gross, but genius, too, I guess*.

“Still just a barricade though. We can’t get too comfortable—stay on your toes. Whatever happens next, it’s bound to happen here. This is the proverbial line in the sand.”

Everyone as anticipating another attack, thought Jean. *But nothing happened*. He frowned. *Why?* he wondered.

His eyes widened. *Eren*, he realized. *We all thought it was just gonna be another Shinganshina*, he thought. *We thought they wanted to get through Wall Rose—and they did. But they didn’t, because something came up—something more important.* His mind was racing, and he looked down, staring at the carpet between his feet. *But*. . . He swallowed, hard. *How could Titans have known? How could the Titans have known what was going on? How could they have known it was Eren? How—* His eyes widened. A sick, twisted feeling crept over him, like spindly, slimy fingers, crept over him, and he shivered. *Unless they were there*.

“Jean?” Sasha frowned. “You alright, there?”

“Fine,” said Jean automatically, sitting up stiffly. Sasha frowned, and Connie opened his mouth, ready to speak, but he was interrupted by movement on screen.

Hannes turned to the soldier he was speaking to, who looked panicked. “Hey, something wrong?”

“No, sir,” the soldier replied, “My apologies. I completely agree. I’m just a little preoccupied about my friends in the vanguard. There was a messenger on the way to HQ with this look on his face.”

Mike grimaced. “I hate that feeling,” muttered Gunther. They were strong, the four of them, it was true, but even that wasn’t always a guarantee.

“I know,” Hannes replied, “Difficult as it may be, you’ve got to stay focused on what’s here in front of us.”

“Is it true what they say about you saving those kids five years ago, sir?” The soldier asked, “They’re cadets now, right? Won’t they be at the vanguard too?”

“That’s right.”

“I’m really sorry, sir,” the soldier replied, looking down. “Don’t know why I felt the need to bring it up.”

“They’re fine,” Hannes said. “Some tough little bastards. Believe me, they know what it takes to stay alive. One of them is one of the best fighters I’ve seen, the other possesses loads of inner strength, and their friend’s a certified genius. They’ll be fine, no doubt.”

I wonder when he found out, Eren found himself thinking. *How did he react? Was he worried?* His stomach twisted. *Or was he angry?* he wondered. *Did he hate me? His comrades died protecting me, and he risked his*. He realized, with a sudden start, that he’d never checked if Hannes were still alive. His stomach twisted and he looked down.

“Cadet Eren Jaeger! Cadet Mikasa Ackerman and Cadet Armin Arlert!” The mentioned cadets stared intensely at the situation before them. “The joint three of you have committed a high act of treason! Whether or not a swift execution is the result depends on you!” Eren opened his mouth as if to speak, but found himself at a loss of words. “Any attempt to move where you stand, anything I deem suspicious, will be met with cannon fire.”

“What. . ?”

“Answer carefully Eren Jaeger! What exactly are you? Human or Titan?” Eren stared ahead at him, eyes wide with fear and confusion, lips pursed into a tight line.

Good question. Bertolt looked down at his own hands.

W—what is that supposed to mean?* He thought. *Why are they all glaring at me like that? It’s like they’re looking at a monster. Oh god, is that what they think?

He really doesn’t remember a thing. Hange was mildly disappointed (there were so many questions they’d wanted to ask!), but a larger part of them was on its hind legs, reaching for what information was dangled tantalizingly before them.

“I’m sorry, sir! I don’t know what you mean!”

“Son of a bitch is playing innocent,” Woermann hissed. “Answer me, you monster! Don’t try to stall with false ignorance! You won’t stand a chance! You’ll be blown to bits before you can reveal your true form!”

“What a fucking coward,” Ymir scoffed. “Reacting is one thing. Overreaction is another. This stretched way beyond that.”

“What true form?”

“Please! Scores of us saw it happen! You emerged from a tTitan carcass in full view of your comrades!” Eren stared in horror as Woermann continued to recount the earlier events. “We’ve let an odd creature like you slip through and infiltrate Wall Rose! Under the circumstances, even though you’re a sanctioned soldier by His Majesty, you are a risk I am well within my rights to eliminate! I will not let the situation stand! Every moment I squander mulling over your supposed innocence puts us all in further jeopardy from attack by the Armoured Titan! Do you understand? I cannot waste any more time or manpower on you! My conscience will not falter to watch you die!”

“I did not understand a single word of that,” said Connie.

“Woermann’s a joke,” said Mike. “Especially since Trost. He’s a laughingstock in the Capitol. They don’t even pretend to respect him.”

“Still,” said Reiner aloud. “There was nothing stopping him from killing those three right then and there. We’re all lucky he didn’t.”

“Oh, no, he did,” said Eren. “Tried,” he amended. “He tried.”

“What?” Krista whirled around to look at him. “What happened?”

“It—” Eren hesitated. “You’ll see,” he settled on saying.

“As soldiers, they all know the price of their position,” Rico began. “If they’re this committed to defiance under threat of death, then so be it. They won't be persuaded, it’s a waste of time.”

“Sir, please!” a soldier cried out. “This might be our only chance! We’ll expand far less human artillery if he’s in human form!”

“Excuse me!” Mikasa spoke, garnering their attention. Her eyes were dark, promises of a painful death lingered behind her gaze. “I wouldn’t. Not while I’m standing here. Unless anyone is feeling up to the task, in which case, well, I’m happy to demonstrate my own tactic on you and every last inch of your traitorous flesh.” Woermann stiffened, eyes widening further in fear at the girl’s words.

“Bad decision,” Mike muttered.

Erwin nodded. *Her loyalty is strong*, he thought. *Excessive, even. But still admirable. But if she can’t start looking at the big picture, she’ll be just as much to a risk to Eren as he is himself.*

“I agree,” Eld said. “I mean, we know you’re right, but calling someone ranking way above you a traitor when you, yourself, are technically committing an act of treason. . .” He shrugged.

“Besides,” Levi said. “What are you going to do to a cannonball? Yell at it?”

“Sir, Mikasa Ackerman was assigned straight to the elite squad fresh out of training,” Mitabi whispered, leaning in beside Woermann. “Equal to a hundred soldiers, easily. If we lost her, it’d be quite the tragedy.”

“Guys,” Eren spoke, voice shaky. “Someone talk to me now. What the hell is all of this?”

“Mikasa!” Armin hissed, “You can’t fight humans! Inside the Walls, there’s nowhere left for you to run!”

Levi’s lip twisted. *Shows what you know, brat*, he nearly snarled out loud.

“Whoever comes at Eren, deals with me,” she said, voice monotone, but a flash of anger could be detected. “I’ll take on the entire regiment if I have to. This isn’t the only way!”

“We just need to talk it out!” Armin pleaded, “They don’t understand what’s happening! They’re all just scared!”

Reiner's eyes narrowed. *Don't be ridiculous*.

Am I the only one here who doesn't think I'm a Titan? **Eren thought, gritting his teeth, *Damn it! Why can't I remember how I got here? I'm too weak to stand up and if I say the wrong thing. . .* His thoughts turned to the cannon, which was still pointed steadily at them. *Is this it for me? Killed by people?* Eren furrowed his brows, looking down. *What was it that he said about me coming out of a Titan carcass in front of everyone? Is he insane? Why is no one making any sense? That was all just a dream, or. . . if not. . . my sleeve. Does this mean my arm grew back? Am I really one of them? That's not possible! What happened to me? Why?***

"You've gotta feel bad for him," said Petra quietly. "I mean, imagine if you were in his place."

"I did," said Eld, "and I do. And, yeah, the Garrison's kind of a pain in the ass right now. But can you blame them for doing their jobs?"

"I'm not," said Petra. "But, still. He's just a kid, they—"

"Think about it rationally, Petra," said Oluo with a sniff. "To them, he was a monster, and they still think he is. Why should they stop and explain things to him?" And then, "It's not your fault that you're soft, Petra, but—"

His voice rose into an embarrassingly high-pitched yelp as Petra pinched his earlobe between two fingers and twisted. "You're insufferable!" He flapped his hands frantically, blood spurting from his mouth.

"One more time!" Woermann yelled, snapping Eren out of his thoughts. "Are you human or Titan?" Eren stiffened as Armin turned back to look at him fearfully.

I don't know what to say! **he thought, panicked. *My life's not the only at stake. I am. . .* Past memories of his childhood in Shinganshina came to him. Happy children basked in sunlight, bright smiles and bright eyes full of hope that had yet seen the terrors of the world around them. *No, I've always been one of you*.**

Is this one of those 'life flashing before your eyes' things, thought Jean, *where time freezes, and you actually have time to think about these things?*

Eren grit his teeth, staring ahead. "I'm human!" he yelled out, making everyone freeze.

Like that needed clarification. Eren frowned. *But it did*.

"So you say," Woermann spoke, voice quieter than his previous frenzied yelling, eyes shadowed, "Forgive me." He began to raise his arm, and the three cadets gasped in fear. "I have no choice. When push comes to shove, all of us are monsters."

"Bastard," Ymir muttered. "Why the hell would he even give them the chance to explain themselves if he wasn't gonna listen, anyways?"

"Eren! Armin!" Mikasa yelled, running back towards the two, "Head for the wall!"

"But Eren's got no gear!" Connie cried, forgetting, in the heat of the moment, that the three were fine (alive, at least, and relatively unharmed) in the first row. "You'll never make it!"

“Wait! No!” Eren yelled back as he was scooped up over Mikasa’s shoulder. His key fluttered in the wind, shining in front of him.

“*Eren*.” Grisha’s voice, sounding distant in memory spoke. “*Behave while I’m gone and I’ll let you in on what I’ve been doing in the cellar*.” Past memories of the few hours in his home before the Colossal Attack came to Eren.

The good doctor’s definitely got something to do with this, thought Levi. *What, though?* He frowned. *He came back and gave Eren the key, and then. . . wiped his memories? For some reason?* His frown deepened. *Why entrust it to Eren? What’s in there? What kind of secrets about humanity would Grisha Jaeger have that even the government don’t?*

The memories suddenly changed to a more harrowing atmosphere, tainted in pink. Eren held the same key in his hand, the string wrapped around his tiny palm. “Listen to me. It’s vital that you keep this key with you at all times. Whenever you look at it, let this thought flood over you. ‘*I must return to that cellar.*’” More memories flashed through his mind as Eren winced, his head pounding. His mind turned to a memory of Grisha filling a needle with *something.* “I’m going to give you a little something that will make you forget for the time being,” Grisha explained, turning towards Eren with tears streaming down his face.

“He wiped your memory,” said Hange out loud. “But why would he do that? Why would he risk everything, just to make you forget it all again? And why did it kick in again when you turned into a Titan?”

“I’m sorry. You won’t remember any of my explanations. When the time comes, know that you must reclaim Wall Maria and head for that cellar.” Little Eren backed away from his father fearfully.

Eren’s spine was tingling, and his palms were sweating. Suddenly, he felt like running very, very far away.

“I know what I’m doing is for the best,” Grisha leaned towards Eren, the needle flashing in the dim light. “This ability will help when the time comes! Their memories will teach you how to use it! Eren!” A flash of memories rushed through his mind. “You’ll understand the truth when you reach the basement!”

Erwin exhaled sharply. *He turned him into a*

Eren squirmed out of Mikasa’s grasp, running towards Armin as time seemed to slow. “*It will be a painful journey! But it is yours to make*!” Woermann raised his arm as Eren ran. “*If you want to save Mikasa, Armin and everyone else. . . you must learn to control this power!*”

If you want to save Mikasa, Armin, and everyone else. . . Eren hissed sharply and ducked his head, squeezing his eyes shut and clutching his skull. A face flashed in his mind—a familiar face, with brown hair and cold green eyes—

No, not green. *Mournful*. That was the word. *Mournful*. Mournful and familiar, and far, far too old.

He knew that face, knew it in ways no one else did. He knew the feeling of cold fingers against sallow cheeks, of rough stubble brushing fingertips. He knew the way it moved, knew what it felt like when he wore it.

He knew that face, but he'd never seen it in a mirror before.

At least, he didn't think so.

If you want to save Mikasa, Armin, and everyone else. . . The words echoed in his mind, a thousand voices saying them together—his, his, his, his, his, his, his—

Eren.

"Eren!"

He let out a sound that was less of a gasp and more of a strangled yell and his eyes flew open. The first thing he saw was a pair of wide, startled grey eyes. Mikasa knelt in front of him, hands on his shoulders. "Eren!" she repeated. "What's wrong? What happened?"

"I don't—" Eren smacked his lips, dragging in a ragged breath. "I don't know," he whispered.

"Oi." Levi leaned over, frowning. "What happened?"

"What was it, Eren?" Hange asked. "Were they memories?"

"I—" Eren shook his head. "I don't know," he said. "I just—headache. I think. I saw. . ." he frowned, "me?"

Woermann brought his hand down, signalling the command to fire.

Eren wrapped an arm around Armin, holding him and Mikasa closer. He bit down on his hand, and bright yellow electricity filled the air.

"How did you know to bite yourself, Eren?" Reiner asked before Hange could.

Eren shook his head. "I don't know," he said. He seemed to be saying that a lot, lately. "I just acted, you know? Like flying on ODM. Instinct."

"Muscle memory?" Annie suggested.

"I don't know," said Eren. "I'm sorry. I really don't."

Bones and flesh spiralled into a giant arm, which caught the impending cannon ball in its grasp. Hannes gasped in shock, turning towards the direction of the sound. On the other side of the wall, Jean and the others watched the smoke rise in the distance.

"Did we get them. . ?" Armin and Mikasa stared in shock at the sight around them. Rico and Woermann stared in disbelief and fear.

"No way, it can't be…." Everyone cried out in terror as the steamed began to settle, revealing half the body of a skeletonized Titan, covered in muscle.

Episode – 10. Response: The Struggle for Trost, Part 6

A recap of the previous episode was shown, showing the moments before Eren transformed. The scene changed, showing what was going on behind the Wall at the time.

"Marco," Daz sniffled. "I'm—I'm done for! I can't fight the Titans anymore!"

"What's wrong?"

"That was good of you," said Jean.

"What?"

"That was good of you," Jean repeated. "Helping him, I mean. Most of us wouldn't have done it. No—most of us *didn't* do it. He was annoying as shit." *Was*. Jean frowned at his own wording. When did he automatically start assuming people were dead before he was certain they were alive?

"He was scared," said Marco. "We all were. I was just helping him."

"No," said Jean. "You were being good."

"I saw my friends devoured right before my eyes! I saw them get eaten alive, yet I felt no sorrow, no hatred. . . only overwhelming relief it wasn't me!"

Oluo flinched at the sight of the blubbering boy. Secondhand embarrassment, he could claim if anybody asked—which was true, partly, but not quite. It felt like eternities, but his own days as a trainee hadn't been that long ago, despite his boasts, and he could still remember being a greenhorn (not that he'd ever admit it). He remembered being a Daz, and it was the worst feeling in the world. Not so much the embarrassment, though that *was* bad (it wasn't helped by everyone else refusing to let him forget it).

He remembered his first Expedition—he was pretty sure all Scouts remembered theirs, too. He remembered shitting himself. He remembered *why*. He remembered sitting in the wagon as they returned home, too shaky to even stand up straight, let alone mount a horse, staring at the streaks of red he'd thought were stained into his hands.

He remembered being a Daz. He remembered why he'd hated it.

Sasha's lip trembled as she watched Daz's breakdown. "But it's going to be my turn next! Now I understand, the true nature of our jobs is we're going to fight Titans until we are bitten to death! If I'm going to be devoured, I might as well end my life right now!" He pulled his swords out with a pained cry.

"I remember that," muttered Connie. He wondered why nobody else had stepped in to stop him. Because they were too tired? Or was it because they agreed?

He didn't know why *he* hadn't helped. And he wasn't eager to figure out which category he fell into.

"Stop! Get a hold of yourself!" Marco yelled, grabbing Daz. "You're not the only one! We're all fighting our fears! Just look at Sasha! She remains a proud soldier, despite all she's been through!" Sasha cried out at his words, startling Marco.

Moblit looked at her. “Were you injured?” he asked.

“Er. . .” Sasha turned red. “Well, I—"

“Um, I have a really bad stomachache,” she whimpered, holding her stomach. “Could I be considered one of the injured?” Marco and Daz were silent in shock for a few seconds, before Daz pulled out his sword again.

Connie allowed himself a small snicker at the situation. *God*, he thought, grin as forced and vapid as he wished the events on screen were. *I’m horrible*.

“It’s all over!”

“Stop it!”

“Yeah, I can see why they had to put out that gag order,” Jean said, watching the scene before him, “Just take a look at the situation they’re in now. If they knew about Eren. . .”

“Lucky there weren’t many of you there,” Mike commented. “I doubt they’d have been able to make an entire platoon keep their mouths shut.”

“I almost didn’t,” Connie confessed, cheeks flushing. “Almost!” he protested when a roomful of unimpressed gazes were turned in his direction. “I didn’t!” *Mostly ‘cause I didn’t think anyone would believe me*, he thought when they turned away. *I don’t think I’d have believed it, if somebody else told me. I’d probably think they were nuts*.

The screen lit up as images of Eren’s memories flashed, before a bolt of lightning filled the screen, tinting it bright yellow.

Why lightning? Erwin wondered. *Why the yellow?* Did it have something to do with the transformation itself, or was it a side effect? *Like calling power down from the heavens themselves*, he thought. He’d read a report once, when he’d been younger, and fresh out of Cadets. He’d been cleaning the archives (terribly), and come across a file, so old it could have just as easily been a fairytale. It had been about an event, early into the history of the Survey Corps, when the public had still had hope, involving a group of cultists worshipping the Titans as gods.

Erwin wondered if, after seeing what they were capable of, other people within the Walls were inclined to agree.

Jean and the other’s looked up in shock as the other soldiers screamed in fear.

“Cannon fire?”

“Why did they fire one shot?”

“Hey, look at the smoke!”

“It’s inside the Wall!”

“What?”

“How come?”

“What the hell?”

“Did they breach the Inner Gate?”

“That’s the sturdiest one of all! This can’t be happening!

“I thought they just fired a bullet after having shut the Gate!”

“Still, what’s with all that smoke?”

“Good heavens, is that Titan vapour?” Jean whispered as Reiner grit his teeth, running off in the direction of the smoke. “Hey!” Annie and the others followed suit as Jean watched in shock, before joining them.

They ran towards the smoke, thought Hange, tapping their pencil against their teeth. *No—they were the* first *to run towards the smoke.* They twisted their head around to peek in the trio at the back of the room (though, at this point, they’d snuck so many glances that they may as well just have forgone secrecy altogether). *Curious?* they wondered. *Suspicious? Or just on guard?*

The screen was lit up by fire and smoke, sizzling around the area. Shots of muscle were shown, clouded by the smoke. Armin looked up in fear, Mikasa’s expression was blank. The soldiers all had their eyes wide open in fear and shock.

“The hell’s going on?” Reiner demanded.

A Titan was shown, half muscle and half skeleton. Mikasa gripped her sword, looking around. Pieces of the skeleton began to crumble.

“Why only half?” Armin wondered. “I didn’t think to ask back then.”

“If that were the first thing on your mind in that situation, I’d be seriously concerned,” said Jean. “It is weird, though.”

“I don’t think we’ve ever seen an incomplete transformation,” said Sasha, eyeing the Titan on screen warily. The ropes of muscles, gleaming red in the sunlight, and the steaming skull put in mind the Colossal Titan, and the similarities were a bit too close for comfort. “I didn’t even know you could do an incomplete transformation.”

“It’s a bit like the spoon, isn’t it?” said Eld thoughtfully.

“What spoon?” asked Reiner.

“When we were working on my Titan training,” Eren answered. “It’s how we found out that I need to have a goal to transform.” He snorted. “It was a spoon, of all things. And it was just the arm, too.”

“We,” Petra grimaced, “reacted a bit harshly.” She glanced down at the scar on her hand.

“It’s alive. . .”

“Captain Woermann!”

“Wait and see how it goes! It’s too dangerous to get any closer! Maintain formation and stand by! Stand by! Have the cannon squad load another round!”

“At least he didn’t just start firing,” said Ymir. “That would’ve sucked.”

The Titan's eye began to twitch. Inside, Eren's eyes matched the twitching, eyes rolled back into his head so only the whites could be seen.

Krista was proud of herself when she didn't flinch. The unnerving imagery was beginning to be familiar, at least. Still, though, what did it say about her that she could watch this without even batting an eye?

She scrubbed a hand over her face. Historia, she thought, didn't particularly care. Not about this, anyways. Historia cared about surviving. If becoming as numb to her own horrors as an alley cat was to a dying man was the price she had to pay, then so be it.

Krista cared, though. Krista cared about everything. Maybe a little too much. And the carefully crafted mask of Krista Lenz is one that would gasp and shudder at Eren's spine-tinglingly creepy expression. So she did.

Eren awoke with a gasp, eyes wide. He took in his surroundings, beginning to panic in fear. He tugged his arm out from the tendons, pulling at the rest of his body until it tore out from the nape. He noticed his arm was still stuck, pulling it out. He looked over at the back of the half-made Titan body. *What is this?*

"Is it always like that?" Jean asked. "I mean, can't you shift without passing out?"

"I—" Eren glanced at Hange, who shrugged. "Not sure," he said. "We haven't managed it yet."

"Then what's the point?" Sasha asked.

"There is no point," said Levi. "Not yet."

Mikasa bristled. "He's trying his best," she bit out.

"Which isn't good enough," said Levi. "We don't know shit, Ackerman," he said, "and I know you've got your own weird priorities, but, personally, I'd prefer Eren get his feelings hurt to losing a squad to protect them."

"Mikasa!" Eren hissed, grabbing her arm before she could retaliate. Her jaw snapped shut. "He's right, you know?"

"That doesn't give him the right to talk to you like that," Mikasa hissed back.

"Actually, it kind of does," Eren snapped. Mikasa drew back, and Eren dropped her arm. "Look," he said. "Everything's weird right now, alright? I get that. But would you quit kicking up a fuss for me every three seconds? It's embarrassing." Mikasa flinched as if struck. Eren ignored her and turned back to the screen, crossing his arms.

Inside the ribcage, Mikasa and Armin sat in shock, the latter more than the former. "I remember hearing the cannon fire, but now we're inside a massive skeleton!" Armin whispered, voice shaking.

"Eren protected us," Mikasa said. "That's all you need to understand." Armin smiled in response, looking over to see indigo flowers blooming in the concrete.

Flowers? Just on the inside?

Eld leaned forwards, a small frown on his face. "Flowers? What's that about?"

“I don’t know,” said Armin. “It’s just something I noticed.”

“But it’s drawing our attention,” Moblit pointed out. “That means it’s important, right?”

Gunther snapped his fingers. “They’re like the ones from the beginning, aren’t they?” he said. “When Eren was having that weird dream, with the windmill, and the bug on that dead guy’s eye.”

“That doesn’t make any sense,” said Oluo. “What would some random flowers in Rose have to do with a dream the kid had five years ago?”

Gunther elbowed him. “Well, genius,” he said, “apparently, nothing is random. If we’re noticing the flowers, that means they’ve gotta mean something, doesn’t it?”

“Yeah, but why the fucking dream?”

“‘Cause we saw them before the dream, obviously!”

“Sometimes,” said Petra to Eld, “I forget that we’re supposed to be adults.”

“Hey!” Eren yelled, walking around the Titan, “You guys all right?”

“Eren? What is this?”

“I don’t know, but this thing is gonna evaporate, like a Titan’s corpse! Let’s get out of here! I don’t know if they’re gauging the situation or just frozen from shock, but the Garrison’s not doing anything right now. However, they’ll probably resume attacking soon enough. I don’t have the confidence to negotiate with them after showing them this.”

“We haven’t really thought too much about the bodies themselves, have we?” Hange said thoughtfully. “I mean, Eren, where do they come from? Do they grow out of you? Like flowers?”

“More like bread,” muttered Sasha, ripping off a chunk from the piece she held in her hand. “And the lightning cooks it.”

“I’m not bread!” Eren said, looking affronted.

“Titan bread,” Connie whispered. Sasha snorted, and took another bite.

“Imagine that,” she said. “It’s like an infinite source of *stuff*.”

Jean gave each of them a smack on the back of the head. “I’m more curious about where they go. I mean, why do they evaporate, anyways?”

“Inquisitive!” said Hange. “I like it! Erwin, can I have him?”

Eren held up the key wound around his neck. “But I started to remember one thing. The basement. My basement! My dad said I’d understand everything if I went back there. He’s also the one responsible for what I’ve become. If I get to the basement, I might just find out the truth behind the Titans as well.”

“Do you think they actually could?” Bertolt whispered.

Reiner shook his head definitively. “There’s no way,” he said. “It doesn’t matter who Jaeger was. You can’t summarize the Titans or their history into a neat little note packet for a bunch of people who haven’t even figured out steam engines yet.”

"Besides," said Annie. "It's not like there's even a possibility of him having known what the Titans really were." *We don't even know what we really are*.

He grit his teeth as memories of the Fall of Shinganshina played through his head. "Dammit!" He hit the skeleton of the Titan, pieces crumbling off the fragile body.

"Careful," muttered Gunther. A bit morbidly, he wondered what would have happened if the skeleton had collapsed right then and there. Would Eren have been able to heal himself? Or would humanity's hope have gone splat from the weight of his own body?

"Why'd he hide it, then? Wasn't that the information the Legion was looking for, even if it cost them thousands of lives? Wasn't that mankind's hope? And it was locked away in our basement all along?"

"And to think," said Mike, huffing mirthlessly. "We were marching right past it for all these years."

"And we still don't know what's down there," said Levi. He scowled. *What's the point of all this?* He crossed his arms. *It's been hours, and we still know fuck all.*

"I don't see why our lord and saviour over there—" he jerked his head in the direction of Omni, who was, once again, asleep, "—can't just show us what we need to know. None of this is relevant—the basement is."

"Matter of trust?" Hange shrugged. "I mean, imagine trying to tell Zackly about this. He'd laugh himself silly, then have us tossed in the nuthouse."

"You already belong in the nuthouse," said Levi.

"That's what they think about you, too," said Hange. They cocked their head, furrowing their brow thoughtfully. "Actually, if they *already* think we're mad, then maybe we could get away with them humouring us for long enough to prove it—"

"I think that's it," said Moblit. "Proving it, I mean. We can't just tell them things, we need to be able to prove *why*. Or, at least, know enough to fake some proof."

"Maybe," said Erwin. *And maybe not*. He glanced at Levi. *Why would we be shown all of this? To help us bond as comrades? No—if anything, all this has done is sow conflict.* He frowned. *Story,* he reminded himself. *We're a story*, and he'd be lying if that still didn't strike a little flicker of resentment in his stomach. *And not a word wasted. That means there's a reason for all of this*. He leaned forwards minutely. *There's something else*.

"What the hell was he thinking? For that matter, where the hell is he? He's left us on our own for five years now—"

"Eren." Mikasa said, snapping him out of his rambling, "We've got other matters to deal with now."

"Right."

She keeps him calm, thought Eld. *In the moment. For the most part*, he amended, glancing over at the trio. *It's like she sees the world as a battle*, he thought, *or a chessboard, and he's the king. No*, he shook his head, *that's* exactly *how she sees things. Might be helpful to*

have her around in the future, to help cool him down. He thought back to what they'd seen so far—Mikasa's protectiveness, Eren's frustration and jealousy, and the sparks of conflict that Eren's hot head and Mikasa's desperation fanned into full-on flames—and titled his head with a small grimace. *Or not*.

"The smoke is clearing!"

"Attack as soon as you see them!"

"Let's attack them without wasting our time!"

"Hold fire!" Woermann ordered.

"Because he's starting to see reason?" Krista theorized. "Or because he wants to wait until the smoke clears?"

"'Cause he's a loser piece of shit who can't make up his mind, I'm guessing," said Ymir.

The Titan's head fell off, crumbling into pieces as it hit the ground, creating more smoke that only further shrouded the trio at the centre of it.

"Good thing it wasn't a full Titan," said Sasha. "Mikasa and Armin would've been smothered. And the smoke's giving them cover."

"Still gotta be shit though, breathing all that dust and Titan vapour in," said Jean.

"You don't think it's bad for us, do you?" Connie frowned, looking down at his hands as if expecting them to burst into boils before his very eyes. "I mean, *we've* been breathing it in."

"Do I look like a fucking doctor to you?" Jean scowled. "How do I know? I was just saying that it probably feel that great."

"I'm going to get out of here," Eren said, as he, Mikasa, and Armin all huddled around.

"Where are you going to go, and how?" Armin asked.

"To begin with, anywhere but here," Eren said. "Then I'll get over the Wall and head for the basement. After I transform into a Titan, that is."

"You're confident," said Oluo, "for someone who was unconscious just a minute ago."

"Can you even transform with that little time in between?" asked Sasha. "I mean, that can't be easy. Don't you need time to recover?"

"Well, it's not like I knew that, back then," said Eren.

"What do you know, so far?" Bertolt asked carefully. "I mean, how long does it take?"

Hange shrugged. "Still trying to figure that out," they said. "We haven't had that much time to practice."

"Can you do that?"

"I'm not exactly sure how I'm doing this myself. But I think I can. It's very hard to explain with a word how I move my arm. In that moment, all I thought about was protecting us from that cannonball. That explains the skeleton's decay, losing durability and other functions. I'll become a more powerful one this time! One that's fifteen meters tall, like when I beat the shit out of those Titans!"

“You’re talking about it like you can pick and choose,” said Ymir. “Like it’s a shirt you can just take on and off.”

“What if it were?” suggested Moblit. “Maybe it’s like a collection of skinsuits? And he only has a limited number of them? You know,” he said, “like how we only have a certain number of teeth?”

“If that were the case, how would we know how many of those skinsuits he has left?” asked Petra. “Could he run out? Hypothetically, I mean.”

“Does that mean it would be a bad idea to keep doing tests?” Hange frowned. “I mean, I don’t *want* to, and we’d be in the shit if a transformation ever went badly, but if the experiments mean we’re wasting skinsuits. . . Still, it *is* all just hypothetical. . .”

Eren felt the hair at the back of his neck stand up and he stiffened, looking around. Then he berated himself. Why would there be a threat here? How would it even get in? He shook his head. Then why had—

He stilled, realizing what it was that had made him nervous. *Could he run out?* The idea bothered him more than he’d have liked to admit. He felt sick, then angry, then worried, then angry again. *Get a hold of yourself*, he scowled, clenching his fists tightly. *It’s just a theory. It’s not like it’s* true—

But what if it is? a tiny, traitorous part of his mind that sounded suspiciously leery whispered. *What if you’re operating on borrowed time? What if, one day, you try to change, and you can’t, and you’re not special anymore?*

He felt like ice water was being poured down his back. *I don’t*, he snarled in his mind, *feel special. That’s not what this is about!*

What is it about, then? the leery part of his mind asked. Eren knew, distantly, in another part of his mind that wasn’t taking part in the argument, that this was ridiculous—he should be focusing, not having an argument with himself over something that probably wasn’t even true.

I’m only special, Eren thought carefully (carefully, as if he had reason to hide his thoughts, as if he weren’t the only one inside his head), *because I’m unique. I’m different, and that automatically makes me special. If*, he thought, with a vicious edge that didn’t make sense for a conversation with himself, *there were other people like me, then I wouldn’t be special anymore. But I’m the only one, so I am, and there’s nothing I can do about that*.

The leery part of his mind was silent. Eren huffed and flopped back against the cushions, crossing his arms. Armin glanced at him, but he didn’t say anything and, for that, Eren was grateful.

It probably should have bothered him more, he thought as he watched the show, how quickly he’d gotten used to his power—his *specialness*. It hadn’t even been a month ago that saying that humans turning into Titans and back again would have gotten him laughed out of the military and into an asylum, but it still felt like an eternity. It probably should have bothered

him even more that the thought of waking up one day and not being able to turn into the creature he most hated would frighten him more than the creature itself.

It didn't, and that bothered him too.

"Eren, your nose is bleeding," Mikasa said, worriedly. Eren wiped at his nose, looking down at his bloodstained hand.

"You're really pale and breathing heavily, too," Armin said, "That's going to be something abnormal with your body."

"You don't say," Oluo muttered.

"He's never had a nosebleed when he was practicing with us," Petra muttered. "Should we be worried?"

"I don't think so," Gunther whispered back. "I don't think we need to be worried until he does start bleeding."

"People have nosebleeds when they're stressed," said Eld. "When they're overheating, too. The inside of a Titan probably isn't the coolest place in the world."

"Probably just a sign that he's at his limit, and should stop," said Oluo.

"Think we can push that limit?" Gunther wondered.

"I think Hange definitely intends to try," said Petra.

Eren wiped the remaining blood from his nose away. "I don't care about my health right now," he said. "I've got two ideas. As long as you don't try to protect me, they'll let you two stay alive. I've caused you loads of problems already. So I think I'll do things on my own from here."

"Did you actually think you could make it all the way to Shinganshina by yourself?" asked Ymir, torn between disbelief and awe. "Damn, Suicidal Bastard, how stupid are you, really?"

"You were surrounded by soldiers," said Levi slowly, "armed to the teeth with weapons designed specifically to kill Titans—that's you, by the way—and big-ass cannons. You had just passed out. You're bleeding. And your big plan was to turn into a Titan—again, exactly what the drunk numbnuts were trained to kill—and run?"

"How were you planning to get over the Wall?" asked Gunther. "They probably would have blasted it to bits shooting you down."

"Like a fly," Oluo muttered.

"Maria's full of Titans," said Moblit, "and a huge group of them just cannibalized you. Even if you made it through Trost, they'd have torn you to bits before you even reached Agernon, let alone Shinganshina."

The tips of Eren's ears were red, and his cheeks were burning. "I didn't *remember* being cannibalized," he muttered. "And that's just 'cause it was a big group. I woulda been fine outside the Walls." He frowned. *I* was *fine outside the Walls*, he thought, and the voice in his head didn't sound like his own. *I was heading for Maria back then, too. But. . . from the South?*

He blinked, and he saw a wall (but not the Wall), and Titans that he knew (but not like that), and a pair of familiar green eyes.

"Eren?" Armin asked tentatively, putting a hand on his shoulder. "Hey. You alright?"

"Huh?" Eren blinked his eyes open.

"Were you sleeping?" One of Armin's eyebrows was cocked slightly, lips pursed in bewilderment. "You just kind of closed your eyes and. . . sat there."

"I—no." Eren shook his head. "It's just—" he hesitated. "Memories," he said, and left it at that. He was almost certain that he was telling the truth.

"No kidding."

"Eren," Mikasa began, "I'll come with you."

"No way!"

"If I'm not able to keep up with you, feel free to leave me behind. But at the same time, I'm free to ignore your orders as well."

Orders. Erwin raised an eyebrow. What an oddly specific word to use.

"I'm telling you to cut that out! I'm not your little brother and I'm not some snot-nosed toddler!"

Information Available for Public Disclosure

Yeast, Part One

"Yeast?" Ymir stared at the screen. She rubbed her eyes, blinked a few times, then looked again. No, she hadn't read it wrong. "*Yeast?*"

Reiner and Annie exchanged bewildered looks. ". . . Because we were starving?" Bertolt suggested weakly.

"*Yeast?*" Ymir said again, voice pitching.

This special yeast is produced in Wall Sina. By placing this yeast in storage sheds and tents containing things like fodder, wheat and soybeans, spoilage is dramatically slowed.

"*Yeast?!*"

Yeast, Part Two

Establishing multiple storage plants that utilise this yeast has been humanity's supply strategy for retaking Wall Maria.

"Bullshit!" Jean exploded. "We did not take Trost back using *yeast*."

"*Yeast!*" Ymir screeched. Krista winced away, rubbing her ear.

"But these have all been so informational!" Moblit babbled, flapping his hands. "Yeast—have we been missing something? What does yeast have to do with this?"

"Yeast." Ymir looked like she was about to cry. Krista patted her on the hand and gave her a quick peck on the cheek.

“He’s right,” said Mike. “These info cards aren’t just here for no reason. That means yeast means something.”

Hange had been suspiciously silent for the past minute, hands folded carefully underneath their chin. Their eyes were narrowed to thin slits, and their lips pursed so tightly that the skin around them had turned white. “Yeast,” they said, so low they may as well not have said anything at all. “Yeast. What do we use yeast for? Beer, labs, and. . . and. . . bread!” They sat up straight as if shocked, throwing their arms out. “Bread! We use yeast in bread!”

“So?” asked Oluo.

“Sasha’s bread analogy!” Hange looked positively giddy. “Sasha, my dear, you might just be onto something!”

“Thank you!” Sasha gave Jean a pointed look. He rolled his eyes, and Marco snorted.

“What does yeast do in bread?” Hange barreled on, jumping to their feet. “It makes it bigger! It makes it go *poof!*” They threw their arms out, nearly smacking Mike in the face. “And it doesn’t weigh a thing! Like Titans!”

“Bread?” Bertolt looked nervously down at his hands, eyes wide.

“You—” Levi blinked. “You’re right.”

“I’m sure of it!” Hange nodded enthusiastically. “Well, not *sure* sure—like, 28 percent sure. Which is still pretty sure!” They let out a delighted squeak, clapping happily. “Oh, this is great! I’ll still have to run some tests, and this doesn’t rule out our other theories, but it’s entirely possible that—” They devolved into noises that could have just as easily been scientific terms and nonsense babble, eyes glazing over as they began speaking faster and faster. Mike, a grin on his face, leaned over and pushed them back onto their rear. “—sequences—ow!”

“Captain Woermann,” Rico said. “The cannon is almost ready. We’re ready sir, what are your next orders?”

“All troops will await my signal!”

“Yes, sir.”

“I met her,” Petra told Eren, “once. At the military summit, in Mitras.”

“She seem like the kind of person to want to shoot a group of kids?” Eren asked drily.

“No,” said Petra honestly. “A bit tough, super strict. I don’t think she would have wanted to do it. But she’d also never disobeyed an order. I don’t think she’d have been eager to start then.”

The Garrison have yet to show any signs that they intend to attack us through the smoke. If they were, Mikasa would have reacted faster than a stray cat,* Armin thought. *Assuming they reload the cannon in the shortest possible time. I guess it’d take them about twenty seconds. Eren will most likely spring into action and be long gone before that happens.

"It's still so weird hearing you think," said Jean. "No offense, I mean," he said. "But the narrator's got the same voice, and. . ." He shrugged, as if to say, "you know."

Armin chuckled faintly. "Imagine it from my end," he said. "I'm hearing my voice say things I've never said before. It's unnerving."

"And we still don't know why it *is* your voice," said Sasha, handing Connie a pretzel before tossing her own into her mouth. "I mean," she said as she chewed, "does it have something to do with the future?"

"The first episode *was* called *To You, in 2000 Years*," said Gunther. "Maybe you're telling a story to someone."

Armin had gone a pale shade of green. "I'm going to be two thousand years old?" he squeaked. He looked down at his hands, arms shaking, as though expecting them to be wizened and withered and draped in wrinkly grey skin. Petra smacked Gunther on the shoulder.

"Hey," said Jean, "look on the bright side. At least, if that were true, that means we live."

"Not all of us," Sasha pointed out. "Just Armin."

Jean thumped her on the head. "I was *trying* to be optimistic, spudhead."

Memories of Eren and Mikasa beating up Armin's bullies flashed through his head. *Why am I thinking of such a thing at a time like this? Could it be because these are our last moments together?* His younger self was shown, cowering beside a crate, tears in his eyes. *When it's all said and done, at the moment of truth, I was a coward. Same as right now. I can't count the number of times they have come to my rescue. But I was always so weak, I couldn't reciprocate the favour.*

"Armin—" Eren began.

"It's in the past," said Armin.

"*Armin*—" Eren tried again.

"*Eren*," said Armin. "I know what you think, okay? But I—"

"It's not what I think, Armin," said Eren. "It's what I know."

I still haven't earned the right to think of myself as their equal. I can't afford to try and repay their kindness by going with them.* Flashes of memories of the trio went through Armin's head. *I'd only slow them down.* Armin sat down, looking at the ground with sad eyes. *I'm afraid this might be the last time the three of us will ever be together.

Mike had watched an execution once, when he was young, before he'd even joined the Cadets. He didn't remember watching the man die—his father had grabbed his shoulders and turned him around before it had happened, and he'd never quite figured out whether he'd been grateful or resentful of that act—but he remembered the man. Drawn and pale from weeks in the dungeons, away from the sun, face pinched and eyes heavy with bags. He'd had a beard, Mike remembered, hanging from his chin like a curtain of moss caked in dry mud, and he'd had no hair on his head. He had been muscular—Mike remembered telling his mother he

would have muscles just like him, one day. He didn't remember what crime the man had committed (though, if he had to put his money on a guess, he would say crimes against the government—not very specific, but neither were the officials), but he remembered the look in his eyes. A paper-thin mask of steely determination, and a hollow cavern in which he could scream until he died.

Mike remembered not understanding what had happened for years. He remembered having his back turned to the stage, and being confused at the mix of gasps and cheers and the strange, choking, gurgling noise. He remembered when he'd finally figured it out, almost four years later, and fallen to his knees and hurled.

Mike had always known that people could kill each other—you didn't live within Wall Sina and not hear horror stories of the Underground—but it had never felt *real* to him. After all, weren't the military united in their battle against the real monsters lurking just beyond the Walls? Why would they kill people when they could slay Titans, instead?

It took him a few more years to realize that the unity was about as strong as a worm trying to hold together a dam. It only took a few minutes after that to acknowledge that fear was a much more vicious motivator.

"Listen, Eren—"

"Just wait a second would you?" Eren interrupted Mikasa. "If you recall, I said I have two ideas. Armin, I trust you to make the right decision."

"Huh?"

"Now hear me out—and I'm well aware of how unrealistic this plan is. The best-case scenario? I try to use my Titan ability strategically, under military direction. This might sound crazy, but if you could convince the Garrison right now that I present no threat, then we'll take that option. If you don't think you can get it done, we'll go with the first idea. I trust you to make the decision."

"That's a lot of pressure to pin on someone," said Connie.

"But I think he's right," said Marco. "Haven't you noticed? Armin never works better than when there's a ticking clock."

"You've got fifteen seconds to decide," said Eren. "I'll trust whatever you choose."

He puts so much trust in him, thought Moblit. *It's almost scary. It's like if Armin told him to take off his clothes and take a running leap off the Wall without his gear, he'd do it in a heartbeat. I never seen someone trust another person that—* He stopped. *But that's not true, is it?* He glanced around. *Because I see it every day*.

"Eren," Armin began, "why would you leave such a major decision up to me?"

"Because you keep a level head," Eren answered, a small smile on his face, despite the fear in his eyes. "You always choose well, no matter how ugly things get. I trust in that."

"When have I done that. . ?"

"Fifteen seconds," Ymir muttered, snapping her fingers. "Less gooey, more go-y!"

"Come on, you do it all the time. Take five years ago, if you hadn't gone to Mr. Hannes for help, Mikasa and I would have been eaten by the Titans."

The skeleton began to crack, a large piece falling off and landing behind Armin, crumbling into pieces.

That's how you see me? You don't think I'm a poor excuse for a friend? I had convinced myself that I was a burden to all of you. But. . . you never thought of me that way at all!

Armin flushed, ducking his head. *Fritz, this is embarrassing*. He squeezed his eyes shut, preparing for the barrage of encouragement and cheers he knew he wouldn't be allow to deflect. His eyes flew open in surprise when no one said a word and, instead of shouting, Eren simply threw his arm over his shoulders. Mikasa took his head and nodded. He stared at her for a moment, then nodded back.

"Armin, our time's up!" Eren said, as the soldiers prepared the cannon once more.

"Artillery crew has reloaded, Captain!" Rico announced.

"It's so hard to remember that all of this has already happened," muttered Jean. *I* know *they're fine, but I'm still on the edge of my seat like a goddamn idiot. Is this why the people on the Homepage like this stuff?* he wondered. *'Cause it makes them feel like this? Nervous? Excited? Are they seriously that lacking for adrenaline?*

Mikasa and Eren have enough faith in me to put their lives in my hands and I have complete trust in the two of them. More than anyone else in this world. And that fact alone is all the convincing I need! **Armin stood up, eyes shadowed. "I'll persuade them, trust me," he said. "You two just act as non-aggressively as you can, alright?" Mikasa and Eren nodded, smiling slightly. Armin swiveled on his heel, walking with determination.**

It's a complete 180, thought Eld. *He's not scared, he's not shaking—he's just determined. It's like he's turned into a completely different person*. On some level, he thought, that could be worrying. He banished the thought with a metaphorical flick of the finger. *He's level-headed in a crisis,* he thought, *and that's not a bad thing. Not everything has to turn out to be a tragedy*.

When Eren first transformed and fought as a Titan, something has been gnawing at the back of my mind. I haven't had a chance to collect my thoughts, but I can do this! I'll just have to think as I talk! **He let go of his gear, letting it tumble onto the ground.**

"Go forth defenseless, and let your words be their guide," Erwin said. "Clever." *Most people wouldn't even have thought of that. And, if they had, I doubt they would have acted on it*.

"Halt! Halt!" Woermann squealed as Armin appeared from the smoke, a soldier aiming their gun at him. Armin raised his hands in the air, staring ahead. "Is this your true form, monster? I don't buy it! I'll give the signal to fire! I mean it!"

"He knows that's not Eren, right?" said Connie.

“Wouldn’t put it past him to not have even noticed,” said Ymir with a disdainful curl of her lip. “All he’d have seen is the monster. Wouldn’t have given a shit about the person behind it.”

“Eren is not an enemy of mankind! We are willing to cooperate with Military Command, and we’ll share everything we’ve learned about his powers!”

“Which is nothing,” said Gunther. “But, of course, they won’t know that.”

“Your pleas fall on deaf ears! He revealed his true form and is a threat, because of that he cannot leave here alive! If you insist he’s not an enemy of ours, show us the proof! Otherwise, we’ll blast him into whatever nightmare he crawled out of!”

“What proof could they show him?” Petra threw her hands into the air. “He hasn’t given them time to even get up off the ground, let alone put a presentation together for him.”

“You don’t need any proof!” Armin yelled back. “That’s right, there’s no need at all!” The screen was tinted green for a few moments as Armin’s thoughts echoed. “The fact of the matter is that it doesn’t matter what we perceive him to be!”

“What?”

“The reports say hundreds of soldiers saw him! And those who were there say they saw him fighting other Titans! And that means they saw him get swarmed by Titans too! The Titans recognized him the same way they see human beings! As their prey! It doesn’t matter how else you look at it, that’s an irrefutable fact!” His words boomed throughout the space, leaving a deafening silence.

Good points, clearly listed, simple and to the point. Mike grinned, elbowing Erwin. “Careful, Commander,” he said. “Slip up, and this kid’ll end up replacing you before we know it.”

“Kid’s got a point. . .” One soldier murmured.

“The Titan is on our side?”

“It can’t be. . .”

“I know we’ve said it before,” said Sasha with a small wince, “but I can’t really blame them for being scared. The only going really over the top here is Woermann.” *But, if I didn’t know Eren. . . well, I think I might just have been a part of that crowd*.

Woermann looked around at the whispering soldiers, his eyes clouded with fear as sweat dripped down his face. He looked up, flying into a rage.

“Prepare to attack! Don’t let yourself be swayed by his cunning lies! The Titan’s behaviour has always been beyond our comprehension! I wouldn’t put it past them to assume human form! He’s speaking our language in an attempt to deceive us! I refuse to let them continue this behaviour unchecked!” The soldiers got into position, forgetting the impact of Armin’s previous words, fear washing over them and taking over their minds.

Bertolt twitched so violently that the couch squeaked, and his teacup clattered against the saucer. Reiner snatched it from him and shoved it back onto the coffee table before anyone could look their way.

"Oh, for god's sake," Annie muttered.

Reiner grit his teeth, holding back a snort of laughter. *And they never would have guessed that he was right*. He drew his lips back in a mockery of a grin, teeth bared. *They just got the enemy a bit wrong*.

***It's hopeless,* Armin thought, mouth agape in horror. *He let logic give way to hysteria! Too frightened to think it through! Eren! Mikasa!* Armin turned around to look at them. Eren smiled slowly, nodding at Armin. Armin stared for a few seconds, before making up his mind. He grit his teeth, flying into a salute.**

You really can't get one without the others, can you? thought Mike. *Put them together, and they're an unstoppable force. Take them apart, and, suddenly, they've hit an unmovable wall. It's like codependency to an extreme*. He shook their head, letting out a small snort of amusement. *I'd shudder to think about what happened it they turned against each other, if I thought that there was a possibility of that ever happening.*

"I am a soldier!" yelled Armin, "and I have dedicated my heart to humanity, sir! Nothing could make me prouder than dying for such a noble cause! If we were to use his Titan ability and combine it with the manpower we have left, I believe we can do it! We can retake this city! For humanity's glory, in what little time I have left to live, I will advocate for his strategic value!" Everyone went silent, the music playing in the background, giving more emotion to the situation. Everyone stared at Armin in shock.

"Captain Woermann, his words are worth considering, sir. Maybe we should—"

***"Quiet!"* Woermann yelled at him, turning away. *"*Don't let their words sway you. They're all traitors!" He began to raise his hand, Armin staring in shock. Mikasa reached for her sword, and Eren reached up to bite his hand.**

Eld swore.

"*I swore an oath as an officer, I will crush all insubordination!*"

Hange frowned. *Is that really what the oath was?* They couldn't remember, not clearly, at least. They'd been too excited at the extra perks officers got—private rooms, offices, *leeway*—and had rattled off the words as quickly as they were fed them. *Crush all insubordination*. They furrowed their brow. *Is that really what we swore to do?*

He brought his hand down with a loud noise, as all went silent. A hand gripped Woermann's arm as he stared in shock.

"That's enough. You should really do something about your nervous deposition, Captain Woermann," Pixis spoke calmly, revealing himself.

"It's the crazy hoot!" Connie laughed.

"That crazy hoot," said Eld, stern despite the small grin pulling at his lips, "is the only reason you guys are alive to joke about him today."

"C—Commander Pixis?"

"Can you not see this soldier's heartfelt salute?" Pixis asked, walking towards them, "I've only just arrived, but I was informed of the situation along the way. You go take command of your reinforcements. I think we could at least hear these young soldiers out." Armin dropped to his knees, face damp with sweat and a smile of relief plastered on it.

"Thank the goddesses the old nut was always mad enough to be a Corpsman," said Mike.

"He really could have been," Erwin agreed. *I doubt High Command would have looked twice at Keith if Pixis had been a Scout*. He pursed his lips. *But, then, where would I have been?*

The scene changed to show a diagram of the walls, in the form of a compass. *According to reports from the Scout Regiment it was anticipated that Titans would come from the south. These reports were proved correct during the Fall of Shinganshina, which is located on the south of Wall Maria. Therefore, it was presumed their next most likely target would be Trost, on the southern side of Wall Rose.*

"Not-Armin's right," said Moblit. "I don't think the North's *ever* had a Titan attack."

"The northern branch of the Survey Corps have a fatality rate of one percent," Hange chimed in. "And that was just because someone fell off their horse and got run over by the wagon. They're really popular up there."

"Why, though?" asked Connie. "Why is it always the south?"

"Does that mean the Titans come from the south?" Armin wondered.

"Maybe there's a big nest up there!" Sasha enthused. "And they hatch like chickens!"

"Does that mean there's a big mama Titan, too?" asked Connie.

Eren inhaled sharply, spine bending nearly in half as he curled forwards, grabbing his forehead. He was expecting it though, this time (expecting was the wrong word—on guard was better, he thought, and now all he could see were guards), and passed it off as a loud, hacking cough.

Big mama Titan. He squeezed his eyes shut, still coughing dramatically as Mikasa rubbed his back, chasing the thread of thought like his life depended on it (and, judging by the way things had been going, it might as well have been). He felt like he was running down a mountain of sand, slipping and sliding and stumbling as the planes of his mind shifted beneath him, the tail of the memory (he was sure it was a memory, this time, or associated with one, at the very least) darting away from him like a firefly in the night. He reached for it, fingers outstretched, and *willed* it back, and—

Ymir. His eyes widened, and he whirled around. The dark-haired girl was curled up around Krista, eyeing the TV with an expression that was almost boredom.

Ymir?

And, suddenly, he could see her—a little girl with hair the colour of straw and heavy, woven clogs too big for small, unsteady feet.

Daughter?

No. Mother*.*

Like she'd sensed him, Ymir stiffened and turned to look at him. Their eyes met, and he held contact for another moment before looking away.

Titans clawed at the Gate. Pixis sat atop the Wall, observing the beasts below. He took a slow sip from his flask, gaze never faltering. *Dot Pixis, the commanding officer responsible for the southern territory. The man in charge of the defense of Trost district.* Pixis took a slow sip from his flask, watching the remains of the city that had been intact just a few hours ago. *The man given full authority over preserving humanity's most vital remaining territory.*

Mikasa, Armin and Eren, the latter looking sluggish, watched as Pixis sauntered over to the edge of the wall, looking down at the Titans below.

"Nope, not any of you. Being eaten by a Titan wouldn't be so bad, if it was a sexy lady one," he mused.

Annie leaned back into the couch, skin prickling as the room was suddenly filled with loud, raucous laughter. "God, if only," Jean snorted.

The man is also notorious for being genuinely eccentric.

"What the hell is going through the Commander's head?" Woermann grumbled. "Going up there with those freaks and not bringing any bodyguards!"

"One freak," Oluo muttered. Petra elbowed him.

Two. Annie kept her gaze fixed on the back of Mikasa's head, cool and unwavering.

"He probably thought bodyguards would just fuck up the conversation even more," said Connie sagely.

"Besides," added Sasha. "If he really thought Eren was a threat, he could just throw him off the side of the Wall."

"Really feeling the love here, guys," said Eren sardonically.

"Well, sir," Rico said, "that's the Commander. He's known for taking a less traditional approach."

"Captain Woermann," Mitabi said. "We have finished assembling the troops, sir".

"Ah, well done." Woermann looked over at the troops, who's eyes were downcast with fear.

"That's that," Pixis said, "So, visiting this basement should clear everything up?"

"Yes, sir," Eren answered, voice breathy with fatigue. "Well, at least I think so."

Suddenly, Eren realized how stupid he sounded. *The basement*. He shook his head in disbelief. *I can't believe that the court actually let that fly*. He wouldn't have, if he were in their shoes. A hundred thousand soldiers' lives, and a couple million more inside the Walls, all riding on a basement that, for all they knew, could have been full of nothing but dust and cobwebs. *I can't believe that they believed me*.

"For the moment there is no way to validate all of the claims you've made. For now, I'll just catalogue them in my head. But I can usually tell the difference between the unctuous and the sincere, which is why I personally guarantee your safety." The trio's shoulders slumped in relief at the Commander's words. "You're Cadet Armin Arlert, correct?"

"Yes, sir."

"You mentioned a plan to harness this so-called Titan ability and then use your friend's power to retake the city? Do you believe it could work? Or were you grasping at straws to try and save your hides?"

"Uh, well. . ." Armin began, "It's both, Commander. I was going to suggest that Eren, using his strength as a Titan, could lift that boulder and use it to block the wrecked gate. That was the best idea I could come up with on the spot. I—I just wanted to make everyone see how Eren's ability might provide a solution to the problem we all face." Pixis turned around, staring back at the city. "Granted, I was pretty desperate to survive."

"Imagine if we could replicate the Titan power," said Hange to Moblit in an undertone, "or build machines with it! We could have a whole team of Titans working around the clock! Think of the progress, Moblit!" They grabbed his arm, shaking him back and forth. "That'd be amazing! Progress like we've never dreamed before!"

"Desperate to survive, huh?" Pixis mused. "That's as credible a reason as any, son." He took a long swig from his flask. He walked towards Eren, kneeling down to face him. "What do you say, Cadet Jaeger?"

"Say, sir?"

"That hole. Do you think you can plug it up, son?"

"What if the boulder weren't big enough?" asked Jean. "Or too big?"

"It would have been disastrous, either way," said Armin with a nonchalant shrug. "But it was the best I could come up with in the moment. It was a gamble."

Yes, Erwin thought*, yes it was*. He looked at the screen and smiled. *And it paid off*.

"Well. . . I—I don't know," Eren answered. "It's possible. But at the moment, I don't understand my power any more than you do. It's just, I feel sort of irresponsible giving you an answer. Because I don't really know."

"Ah, yes, of course, my apologies," Pixis chuckled. "I asked you the wrong question." His smile dropped, voice turning more serious. "Are you willing to, Cadet Jaeger, or not?"

Eren's eyes widened, Pixis's golden eyes stared at him with such intensity. Pixis glanced over behind him, at the war-torn city. The boulder was shown, along with the hole in the gate.

Still temporary, thought Jean. *Wouldn't take much for the armoured asshole to push it aside, or the giant red dude to kick it away*. He frowned. *How the hell do they plan to open the Gate now?*

"I'll do it! I'll do it! I don't know if I can, but I'll do it!" Eren answered, brows furrowed in determination.

Episode – 11. Idol: The Struggle for Trost, Part 7

“I’ll do it! I’ll do it! I don’t know if I can plug the hole, but I’ll do it!” Eren said.

“Well said. You have the heart of a lion.” Pixis grinned, putting his hands on Eren’s shoulders. He walked over to the edge of the wall. “Senior officers, come gather! We have a strategy to establish!”

“What? It’s a wild idea! I didn’t think it would actually be established!” Armin exclaimed, shocked.

“Better a shit chance than none, I guess,” said Gunther.

Or maybe just a chance to cut a freak down. Eld winced at the thought. *Who’s going to notice an extra dead Titan?* Maybe not the idea at the forefront of the Commander’s mind, but he wouldn’t put it past him to have at least thought of it.

“I was thinking the same thing,” Eren said. “There’s no point in wondering with his judgement. Pixis probably sees something that we can’t.”

“Something we can’t see?”

“Either way, before we execute this strategy, we have a fundamental issue,” Eren said. “The Commander clearly understands the situation.”

“You’re really just going to swallow that?” asked Ymir, raising an eyebrow.

“What’s there to swallow?” Eren crossed his arms. “That’s all there is, isn’t there?”

“‘The Commander clearly understands the situation’?” Ymir repeated. “Do you even hear yourself? You don’t even know what he’s planning!”

“Ymir, you’re in the army too,” said Armin.

“That doesn’t mean I’m blind,” she said. “Or deaf, or stupid. I can still think for myself.”

“What, and I can’t?” Eren demanded.

“Oh, you can.” She huffed. *Just about all the wrong things*.

“Which would be?” Armin asked.

“Our enemies are not just the Titans.” Eren spoke, almost too softly.

Reiner straightened in alarm. “What?” Sasha glanced at Connie, who shrugged, bewildered. “Huh?”

“You mean the bureaucracy?” asked Jean.

No, thought Erwin. *Not directly, at least.*

Not you. Levi dragged his thumb down the side of his leg, the digit pressing almost painfully into flesh. *If only we were so lucky*.

“I—” *I don’t know what I mean*. “Yeah,” said Eren. “Yeah, I guess. The merchants, too? I don’t know. Just—” he shrugged. “Yeah.”

Except, he thought as conversation picked up around him, *I don’t remember saying that. No—I don’t remember* why *I said that*. It was turning into a trend, he realized. *Would I have*

even noticed if we hadn't been brought here? Or would I have just kept spewing bullshit and forgetting about it?

Armin stared in shock at his friend's words, but before he could take them in, Pixis returned.

"The time is nigh," he said, and the cadets stood to attention. "I will have you actively participate, my young soldiers."

The scene changed to behind the Wall, showing the soldiers all huddled together, speaking amongst themselves.

"A strategy to reclaim Trost?"

"Seriously? There's no hope in plugging that hole!"

"What's the Commander thinking? It's a damn suicide mission!"

"The only option is to protect Wall Rose! Forget plugging the hole!"

"Some bureaucrat's pushing this through for the glory!"

Armin realized his fists were clenched. *I didn't realize*. He unfurled his fingers and dropped his hands. *I didn't even think*. His knuckles were white, fingers gripping his kneestight enough to bruise. *It was a crazy idea. I know that, everyone knows that—anyone who doesn't would have to be stupid. I just didn't know—* He swallowed. *No. I knew. Somewhere, deep down, I* had *to have known. But—* He squeezed his eyes shut. He was still shaking, hard enough he could almost hear it. He tightened his grip, feeling the bones in his hands grind against the ones in his legs, and took a deep breath.

Like chess pieces, a voice that sounded horrifyingly like his whispered in the back of his mind. *Just a strategy. What's a few lives lost for the greater good? It's not a moral argument—it's math. Would you shoot a bear to save some horses? Of course you would. What does it matter if a few dogs get trampled along the way?*

"I can't—I can't do it!" Daz whispered, shaking like a leaf in the wind. He grit his teeth, an screamed, grabbing at his hair, "We'll die! We're all going to die! I just want to see my family!"

"Hey Daz, calm down!" Marco cried, his own voice panicky.

"You! I heard that!" a superior officer shouted, making his way over to the two, "Are you thinking of abandoning your duties?"

"Sir, please!" Daz cried, "There's no point in just sending ourselves off to die!"

"What about your obligations as a soldier for the good of humanity?" the officer snarled, reaching for his sword. "I'm authorized to administer a death sentence at this point of our crisis!"

"How would that help?" Jean demanded. "At best, it's just another body to clean up. At worst, you'd end up with a couple hundred panicked people with swords." Murder, as a concept, was something Jean was far from familiar with. There'd been a time (a time that he

thought back on wistfully, a time that he longed for like he'd never wanted anything before, a time that felt like the memory of a dream he knew he'd be forgetting when he woke up, which was stupid, because it had only been a few years ago) (What was that they said about time? That it flew when you thought you were going to die?) where he'd never even have considered the possibility. Why would you? Life was precious, he'd been taught in school—there wasn't enough of it to waste. So what, he wondered, gave the man the authority to threaten to take it away? A title? A few extra years' experience?

He'd wanted to be an officer, once. The hope was fainter now (all he wanted now was to make it through the year), but it was still there. *Could I do it?* He didn't know.

"I'm okay with that," Daz wailed, getting out his own sword. "I'll take that over being eaten by a Titan!"

"He wouldn't, would he?" Moblit asked, furrowing his brow.

Hange shrugged. "Can't say," they said. "I don't think he did." *It's still something to think about though*, they thought as the scene kept going. *People. Huh*. They glanced around the room. *What a concept*.

"It's not something we normally take into account, is it?" said Erwin. "The actions of individuals, that is. People are hard to predict."

"And you'll be thinking about that when you're playing with your chessboard?" Levi said. *Not like you'd need to*. He tapped a quick, four-beat tattoo against his knee. *The idiots would dive into the Titans' open mouths if you asked them to*.

Marco rushed over, pinning Daz's arms down. "Daz! Get a hold of yourself!"

"Let go of me! Let go!" Daz screamed. "I'm not going back to that nightmare!"

Who'd blame him? Bertolt picked at a hangnail, eyes fixed anywhere but on the screen. *Really, who?*

"You hear that?" The soldiers began whispering amongst themselves again at the sight of Daz's spectacle.

"He's not wrong, you know?"

And they call themselves an army? Reiner's lip curled, and he didn't bother trying to figure out if it was in disgust or disdain. *This isn't a war. It's hardly a skirmish. It's not even a fight*. There was a poem he'd read, one of the few they'd been allowed, and a line creeped back into the forefront of his mind. *How little you are. How quiet you fall. You are born and you die blind*.

"I wonder if anyone over here is against this," a female soldier whispered, looking down.

"I at least want to choose how I die," her friend said, beside her.

You still can. Try as she might, Sasha couldn't dash the image of the boy from the storehouse's face from her mind. *Glee*. There'd been glee in his eyes when he put the gun in his

mouth. Glee and calm and something that almost looked like hysteria. Like he'd been waiting his whole life to blow his brains out.

Living's always better, isn't it? She remembered streets slick with blood and bile, air hot with drifting ashes and decay, and piecing together bodies from sticky, half-eaten limbs like the world's most gruesome parody of a puzzle. *Isn't it?*

"Hey, you two!" a male voice yelled.

"I was only joking around, sir!" The girl whirled around, thinking it was the officer.

"Do it!" the man ordered, eyes dark as he spoke to her.

"What?"

"As loud as you can! Get everyone to freak out! There are others in the squadron that think the same thing! We can take advantage of a distraction and get out of here!"

Get crushed, more like. Oluo scowled. *What does he think a panic will help?*

"If you're not here, where exactly are you going to go?" Jean asked, overhearing the conversation.

"I'm going to see my daughter!" the man said, "The Wall's going to be broken down anyway!"

Eld closed his eyes and let his head thump against the back of the couch.

Mikasa's fists clenched in her lap. *And you think that's worth it? A few minutes, an hour, maybe a day, knowing that she's going to die because you wouldn't stay and fight?*

I hate this, Connie thought. *I hate it. I hate seeing it again, and I hate that we know what's going to happen. I hate that it makes it so hard to blame anyone*.

Armin felt sick.

The scene changed to Eren and Pixis walking on top of the Wall.

"It's believed that before the Titans ruled the land, there were different races and creeds all fighting and killing each other," Pixis said. "Then someone said, if there was an enemy that was not part of humanity, that would unite us all, and humanity would stop fighting each other. What do you think?"

Bertolt made a choked, strangled noise in the back of his throat that could have been either a laugh or a scream. "I think it sounds stupid," said Gunther bluntly. "How does this philosophy work, then? He's making it sound like someone made the Titans, or that some higher power sent them to make us all get along?"

"Not like it worked," Oluo sniffed.

You have no idea. Annie's lip curled.

The idea of there being different *types* of people was an idea that should have been laughable. A month, or even a week, ago, Mike wouldn't have even thought about it. Now, though. . .

He glanced at Mikasa. *It seems impossible*, he thought. *But I guess it's hard to argue when the proof's sitting right in front of you. What were they like?* he wondered. *Did they look different? Speak differently?*

Why are we the only ones left?

"This is the first time I've ever heard of it," Eren said. "It seems rather optimistic. It makes me yawn."

"Really?" Sasha asked.

"What?"

"It just sounded a lot like something you'd be on board with," she said. "You know, all of humanity against the big, bad Titans? It's kinda what you preach, isn't it?"

"Well, yeah," said Eren. "But there's a difference in thinking we should fight the Titans and thinking that they exist to unite humanity, or something." *Feels like the exact opposite, in fact*.

"I think the same. It's naïve." Pixis laughed, turning back to look at Eren.

"Even now, we're struggling with such huge adversaries and we are not even close to saying we are united," Eren said.

"Precisely. If we don't unify soon, it will be difficult even to fight." As they walked along the wall, they walked pass Hannes' squad. Hannes looked up and noticed Eren.

"Oh, it's him!" said Connie. "He survived!"

"Eren? You've survived!" Hannes said with a small smile as the other also noticed him. Eren almost glared at him, pointing down with his finger. *What? Focus on my duties? What attitude! By the looks of it, Armin and Mikasa are safe too. Wait, why is Eren with the Commander?*

As they walked, Pixis pulled out a flask from his jacket, taking a long swig.

"Even in the middle of the battle. . ." Mike shook his head in disbelief.

"He's incorrigible." Erwin grinned.

"Do you want some?" he asked, passing the flask to Eren.

"Thank you, sir!" Eren answered, grabbing the flask. He took a chug from it, and his face scrunched up in disgust. He turned his head to the side, spitting out the drink over the Wall as Pixis looked ahead, amused.

Laughter erupted throughout the room at the much-needed respite, and Eren turned red. "Walls, Eren, why'd you drink so much?" Gunther snorted.

"Haven't you ever drank before?" Oluo snickered.

"Of course!" Eren exclaimed hotly. "It was just. . . strong."

"*Walls*," Gunther wheezed, burying his face in his hands.

The scene changed back to the soldiers behind the wall. Daz's voice could be clearly heard.

"If you're going to kill me, just get it over with!"

“Don’t think I won’t!”

Petra dried her palms on her pants. “At least they haven’t started fighting yet,” she said. *I thought for sure* someone *was going to snap*.

“Looks like he didn’t have the stomach for it,” said Eld in an undertone. *Didn’t*. He wouldn’t delude himself with the belief that the man had survived.

It struck him, once again, how strange the whole thing was. Dead men on a screen, a dead man in the room, watching events that had already happened. Weird? Definitely. Disconcerting? Without a doubt. Frightening?

Absolutely.

Pixis stepped to the edge of the Wall, clearing his throat. “Attention!” he yelled, voice booming as everyone went quiet. “I shall now explain the Trost Recovery Operation! Our primary objective is to reseal the hole!” Everyone went stiff at those words, sweat dripping down their faces.

“What a pair of lungs,” muttered Ymir. “I’m shocked they heard him over all that bickering.”

“He’s messing with us,” Marco said, voice shaky with shock.

“As for how the task will be done, allow me to introduce someone,” Pixis continued as the camera panned over to Eren, who was standing beside him. “This is Cadet Eren Jaeger!” Eren saluted, looking ahead determined. Jean and other members of the 104th looked up in shock at the sight of their friend.

“Eren?” Connie asked.

“This young man is the successful project of cutting-edge research! Cadet Jaeger possesses the ability to manifest into a Titan!”

“Give me a break,” muttered Annie. “People actually believed that? They’ve barely figured out gas as fuel.” *People will swallow anything*. Her nails dug into her palms.

“Hey, I didn’t understand what the Commander said,” Connie asked, leaning over to Ymir, eyes wide in shock. “But it’s not because I’m stupid right?”

“Shut up, stupid. . .” Ymir answered, not looking at the bald boy.

What’s with the reaction? Reiner’s eyes narrowed and he leaned forwards. *That’s not shock. She’s not surprised at all. That’s—*

He knew that look. He’d seen it on other people’s faces, and he’d seen it on his own.

That’s not shock, he thought. *That’s fear. But she’s not afraid. Not of him, at least*. He frowned. *It’s almost like she was waiting for this to happen*.

“Having assumed Titan form, Cadet Jaeger will hoist that immense boulder on his back and reseal the hole with it!” Pixis continued. “Your duties are to protect him from other Titans!”

The camera panned over to where Armin and Mikasa planned with two Garrison soldiers.

“You mean we don’t need to fight them?” one of the soldiers asked.

“Sorry, I know it’s not my place to interject,” Armin apologized.

“It’s alright, go on with what you were saying.”

“That’s a concept,” said Gunther “Protecting a Titan instead of fighting it. Fighting *with* it, even.” He was still getting used to it himself.

Petra nodded. “I’d be worried for Eren,” she said. “I mean, aside from the obvious. What’s to say one of the soldiers wouldn’t attack him? He’ll be on their side, but you can’t fight instinct.” *If they hadn’t assigned the best to protect him, that might have been just what happened*.

“Right,” said Armin. “Titans are generally drawn to large groups of people.” A diagram was shown as Armin continued speaking. The diagram showed a group of Titans in red walking towards a group of soldiers in blue at the edge of the wall. The boulder was shown behind the Titans as a small group of soldiers stood near it. “*If enough of us collected in the corner away from that hole, we could lure the Titans away from Eren’s path. The Titans will be grouped together, so we can use our cannons and avoid casualties. Of course, we can’t leave Eren defenseless. We’ll need a modest band of Elites to act as his bodyguards. Also, there may be Titans that enter through the hole. He will depend on the competencies of his bodyguards*.”

“It’s a good plan,” said Erwin. “It covers everything, and you’ve got contingencies.”

Armin could only nod. “Thank you, sir,” he said dully. *How do you do it?* he wanted to ask. *How do you look these people in the eye knowing that, one day, they’re going to die because of you? How can you keep doing it?*

He didn’t.

“Okay, got it. We can alter the plan around that.”

“This plan depends on Eren being able to move that boulder. But there is nothing to assure us that he is able to do it.”

“Of course, I worry too. Sending people to their death is no laughing matter. But I can understand what the Commander is thinking.”

Armin had been there. He remembered how it had played out, how it had happened. How they’d won.

So why was it that all he could think about was how they were going to lose?

“Yes, time is an issue. Titan are still lumbering into Trost as we speak. The longer we wait, the more Titans fill the town and our chance of succeeding decreases,” the other soldier said.

“With that, our chances of Wall Rose being breached increase as well.”

“There's something else, too. There’s a limit to how we can suppress our fear.”

The scene switched back to the soldiers behind the wall as they all spoke in fear at the situation before them.

“The kid can lift a rock that big?”

“Has humanity captured and now controls a Titan?”

“It’s a lie!” Daz cried out, “You can’t expect us to die for some godforsaken reason! What do you think we are? We are not tools for you to play with!”

Armin put his cup down gingerly, somehow managing not to drop it from trembling fingers.

Mikasa turned around, looking up as he stood. “Armin?”

“Bathroom,” he muttered. He walked away. He moved stiffly, mechanically, and it took all that he had not to run.

The bathroom door clicked shut and Eren leaned over, nudging Mikasa with his shoulder. “What’s wrong with him?” he asked.

Mikasa shook her head. *What can he change? I can’t blame him for not wanting to see it again*. She pursed her lips and looked back at the screen. *I’m not so sure if I want to*.

“Human weapons?”

“It’s all a deception”

“We’re being duped!” Sasha was shaking as she listened to the cadets speak amongst themselves.

“They’re telling us to die today? I’m out of here!” the same soldier that spoke to the two girls earlier cried out, turning away. Others followed his example, walking away as the ones who stayed stared at them in shock.

“They just—” Eren stared at the screen in bewilderment. “Did—”

We didn’t see that, thought Mikasa. *Nobody told us*.

“I can’t believe this,” Petra growled. “They swore oaths!”

Eld shook his head wearily. “I hate it too,” he said, “but they’re not Corpsmen.”

“Me, too!”

“And me!”

“I’m leaving!”

“Wait, that’s treason!” a superior went over, pulling Daz back.

“To hell with you! My family gets all the time I have left!”

Jean scowled, picking at the skin of an apple. *I wish I could hate them*. He glared at the TV. *I really want to*. He stabbed at the fruit with a nail, and juice spurted onto his shirt. He laughed bitterly. *Pot, meet kettle*.

“This is getting out of hand,” Ian said to Rico, as Woermann looked back with anger in his eyes.

“I know. If we don’t do something, we’re going to lose control,” Rico replied.

“Traitors! I’ll kill you where you stand!” Woermann yelled, pulling out his sword. “Desertion is answered by death!”

“Say what you will about the bastard,” said Ymir, “he’s loyal.” *I’d congratulate him, if it didn’t mean shit*.

“Anyone wishing to leave will be. by my orders, not charged with treason!” Pixis yelled, making everyone go silent again.

“What’s he doing?” Oluo demanded. “They’re all gonna bolt, now!”

“But they didn’t,” said Eld. *What did he say?*

“Those who have seen a Titan firsthand will not be forced to relive that again. Anyone that knows the horrors of a Titan, leave us! Additionally, whoever knows the horror of Titan, but wants their own family to experience the same horror, leave us!”

Moblit let out his breath in one long rush.

“Manipulative bastard,” Mike breathed.

The man who spoke with the two girls froze in his spot, imagining his daughter in the hands of a Titan.

“Not that. . .” he whispered in horror. “My daughter is my last hope.” He, along with other soldiers, turned back around.

A flush of something that felt like resentment welled up inside Krista and she looked away. *Must be nice*, she thought bitterly.

“I want to tell you a story that happened four years ago,” Pixis said. “Namely, the operation to retake Wall Maria. I’m sure all of you know this already. Officially we named it reconnaissance, but it was little more than an exercise in population control.” As Pixis continued to speak, Armin’s thoughts flashed back to the death of his grandfather.”

Out of habit, Eren glanced to the side. He frowned and twisted around to look at the bathroom door. It was still shut, and not a sound came from behind it.

“We let ourselves believe a lie, because the deaths of our fellow human beings allowed us to survive. The guilt is ours. We have a debt to pay back to humanity. The citizens of Wall Maria survived due to many casualties, but what about this time? If Wall Rose succumbs, the repercussions will be immeasurable! The resources of Wall Sina cannot support half of those who live there right now! Humanity will be wiped out, not by the Titans, but through killing each other!” Images flashed through the screen. One showed citizens being taunted by the military police as they were forced to give up their food. Another showed a priest speaking to a woman who was tied to a post, blindfolded and had her hands clasped in prayer. A final image was shown, of soldiers and citizens fighting each other.

“No way,” Connie muttered.

“That wouldn’t actually happen, would it?” Sasha asked, brow furrowed.

Brats. Levi clenched his jaw and looked down at his hands, picking at his cuticles. *You haven’t got a clue*.

“We can’t kill each other at this Wall. If we must die, let us die here in battle!” Everyone stared at him in shock, digesting his words.

I don’t know if I’ll be able to lift that rock* Eren thought, *But I know what I must do. I might be wrong but I must be successful! I have to be the hope for everyone!

The bathroom floor was cold. Armin didn’t care. He sat with his back to the door, eyes closed, and mouthed along to Pixis’s speech as he listened.

Population control.

His grandfather had known. He had to have. He thinks that he did, too, in a way—understood the way a child does, knowing, somewhere in the back of his mind, what was going to happen, but still being desperate enough to believe the pretty lies.

They hadn’t even been good lies.

He still remembered what it was like, standing on top of the Wall and watching in awe as the senior officers—the great soldiers, the undying veterans, the heroes—listened to *him*, followed *his* plan. At the time, he’d felt something like ecstacy. Now, all he felt was hollow.

The guilt is ours.

Damn right it was.

He listened to the swell of music and pulled his legs to his chest, fists clenching. He buried his face in his arms and screamed.

ODM Gear Weight Shifting Equipment Part 1

Omni-Directional Mobility Gear requires the skill to shift one’s weight using the belts wrapped around the body.

ODM Gear Weight Shifting Equipment Part 2

As the goal of the equipment is high speed, omni-directional mobility, it has been made as lightweight as possible.

“Good, you’re all here,” Pixis said. “You have one mission only, protect Eren Jaeger. Any risks associated with this operation are yours to eliminate. This is a high-risk mission, you will most likely fight a lot. Humanity depends on the success of this mission.”

“Sir, may I ask something?” Rico asked.

“Of course.”

“Will this human weapon be able to transform?”

“Rico, don’t,” Ian hissed.

“I’m sure you also have doubts.”

Eren looked down at his lap and picked at his thumbnail. *What good is this?* The thought popped into his head suddenly, unbidden. *Why do we bother? We’re basing all of our plans*

around me, around my abilities, and everything's based on the idea that I'll be able to do whatever they want me to. He frowned. *We've got no contingencies*, he thought. *No contingencies aside from a standing order for execution, that is. And what then? What do they do if they have to take me down? Rebuild their plans, all the way from square one?*

What use is a weapon if you can't even use it?

"Sir," Mitabi spoke up, "This mission depends on whether or not Eren Jaeger can transform, which is uncertain. If he cannot do it, there will be a large number of casualties."

But there's so much more to it, thought Hange. *So, so much more.* They let out a loose, airy giggle, biting down on the end of their pen. *Oh, my dear Pixis, transformation's just the beginning. We've got no idea*. . . They rocked back and forth, grinning manically. *No idea at all*.

"I see," Pixis said, pinching his mustache. "Do you all like losing to a Titan that much? Personally, I don't. I hate losing. But I've been stuck on the losing side since day one." Rico and the others all looked at each other. "I want to win against the Titans. I want to be victorious over those over-sized freaks."

"Of course, sir, we feel the same way!" Rico spoke.

"So we have no choice but to rely on the boy. This very uncertain aspect is how we have a chance of winning over those Titans."

"No pressure, right?" Connie muttered.

"Commander, we are ready to commence the operation."

"Ian Dietrich, Rico Brzenska, Mitabi Jarnach," Pixis said. "You are the Garrison regiment's best and brightest. Win this one for humanity." The three of them saluted in response.

Rico lived. This, Eren knew.

Ian Dietrich.

People had died for him. This, Eren also knew.

Mitabi Jarnach.

But it was different, having faces to put to the numbers, names to the bodies. There was something about seeing them that hurt so much more than watching the pyres burn.

Ian Dietrich and Mitabi Jarnach.

Was it because he'd known them personally? Because they'd talked, because they'd planned, because they'd looked him in the eyes and spoken to him, him personally? His stomach twisted.

Mitabi Jarnach and Ian Dietrich.

Is that selfish? he wondered. *Cruel? Cold? Callous? Why is two so much worse than two hundred?*

Ian and Mitabi.

He had a feeling that those names would haunt him until the day he died.

“Ian, I’m assigning you as squad leader.” Pixis turned to the man in question. “On-site contingencies will be yours to deal with.”

“I am?”

“I have no objections,” Rico said with a small smile.

“Neither do I,” Mitabi agreed.

“Please, sir, I’m not competent enough.”

How did he die? They’d been in the same squad, in the same area, but Mikasa must have missed it. They’d talked, him and her, if only for a few minutes. She hadn’t even remembered him until the last few episodes, but, now, he was all she could think about.

Dead. What a simple word. There wasn’t even an inkling of it to suggest what it really meant.

She wondered if she could have saved him.

“Don’t worry. You appreciate alcohol do you not? You know what a bad and good vintage is. It’s in your hands.” Mitabi was silent for a moment, then saluted.

Armin slipped out of the bathroom as silent and unobtrusive as a shadow. The room crackled with tension that Armin couldn’t have sawed apart if he tried, every eye fixed on the screen. He hesitated for a minute, debating whether to return to his seat. And then the scene changed, and he saw his own face on screen, making his decision for him.

He leaned against the wall, folding his arms behind him, looking at a point somewhere to the left of the screen. On the couch closest to him, Bertolt shifted, then turned to glance at him over his shoulder.

Armin didn’t meet his eyes. Bertolt watched for another moment, then turned back. Neither of them spoke a word.

The camera panned over to where the Shinganshina Trio stood.

‘I’m so sorry, Eren,” Armin said. “You ended up shouldering all the responsibility.”

“I’ve told you before, you have a gift for strategy. I believe in you, Armin.”

They know his worth, thought Bertolt, *know what he can do, knows how useful he is. So do we*. He glanced at Reiner. *So does he*.

“Eren, I think—” Mikasa began but was interrupted by the other.

“Don’t say you’re coming with me! You’re part of the decoy team.”

“I can’t leave you alone, you—”

This again. Levi scowled. *One day, someone’s going to get hurt*.

“Enough! I’m not your little brother or your child! I’ve told you before!”

Mikasa stared at him, then looked down sadly.

“Walls’ sake, Jaeger,” Jean groaned, pressing the heels of his hands into his eyes.

"And on the list of people who definitely aren't empaths. . ." said Oluo. Petra rolled her eyes and handed him a tissue, then thumped him hard on the back of the skull.

"Ackerman! I want you on the team that'll be providing Jaeger with backup!" Ian ordered. "We'll need your skill! Let's go, execute the strategy!" Mikasa and Eren ran off as Armin went off in the opposite direction.

See you, Armin. Don't die

Yeah, you too.

The squad ran alongside the wall, as battle music blared in the background.

"They said you're some human weapon? I don't care, just seal that hole! We'll protect you on both sides!"

"Yes, sir!"

"Eren, how is your body doing?" Mikasa asked.

"Yes," he replied, as if he hadn't heard her question properly.

Without a word, Sasha plopped her face into her hands.

"Eren, I said—"

"I'm fine, okay? I feel much better than when we were surrounded!"

"We're not playing with dolls here, Jaeger." Rico said, catching up to the two.

You don't comprehend death by seeing a thousand people die, thought Moblit. *You do it by watching one person die. One corpse is a tragedy. A hundred is a statistic.* He frowned. *What's his grasp on it?*

'I don't mean to. . ." he trailed off.

"To think, humanity's fate lies in the hands of a brat like you," Mitabi said. Mikasa glared at him, eyes narrowed.

So quick to jump to his defense, even when he's wrong. Mike frowned at the TV. *Is there anything she wouldn't do for him?* He didn't want to think about where the limit lay.

"All of you, cut it out!" Ian scolded. "We're almost in range of the giant boulder! I'm not seeing any Titans nearby, the decoy strategy must be working!"

Over with the decoy team, Titans reached up for the humans on the wall.

"Just focus on luring the Titans to our corner of town! Avoid unnecessary battle!"

"There's something I want to say, Jaeger," Rico said. "With this strategy, many soldiers will probably die. All for you. These are our senior, comrades, and subordinate soldiers. Aside from being soldiers, death is above all of them. Remember that they are not just pieces in a game."

If only it were so easy, thought Erwin. *But, sometimes, we don't have a choice*. He flexed his hands. *Scales are easy. Life is impossible*.

A group of decoy soldiers, including Sasha and Daz lured a Titan away from the boulder. It stretched out a hand, but the soldiers jumped away. "Each of them has a name. They all have hopes and fears. Alyosha. Dominic. Fine. Isabel. Ludwig. Martina. Guido. Hans."

Names. Eren closed his eyes, letting out a breath. *Always with more names*. He hadn't remembered, the first time. He remembered now.

How many was that, now?

"They are all flesh and blood humans. There are some that I have known since Cadets. They, too, will probably die for you today. You have the responsibility to make sure their deaths weren't pointless. No matter what happens. Carve that fact into your bratty heart. And then fulfill your responsibility as though your life depends on it."

I'm the one she should be saying this to. Armin closed his eyes, letting his head thump against the wall. *I made the suggestion, I made the plan. I was the one to forget that they were human*.

"Yes!" Eren answered, looking determined. *I'm going to do this! I will!*

"Not once has mankind risen above the Titans!" Pixis yelled. "As the Titans keep moving forwards, humanity continues to retreat! We've continuously lost territory! But when our strategy succeeds, today is the day land taken by our greatest enemy will be reclaimed!

"This is the place, let's do it!" The soldiers switched to maneuver gear, jumping off the Wall.

"It will be the first time humanity has been victorious over the Titans!" Rico stayed atop the wall, firing a flare into the air.

"Green smoke signal confirmed," Anka reported. "The elite squad is following the strategy as planned!"

I'm nervous! Sasha worried her lower lip with her teeth. She'd heard, of course, what had happened afterwards, but, still. . . What was it they said? Seeing is believing?

(Even if she didn't know whether she *wanted* to believe it.)

"*In comparison to what we've lost, it may seem small*." Eren and Mikasa flew through the air with the rest of the group, swooping around the buildings as they got closer to the boulder. "*However, this small step is a giant step for mankind*!"

Annie made a noise like a ragged snicker, looking down. *Speaking for mankind*. She shook her head, loose strands of hair flapping about in front of her face. *No clue. Not a single one of you has any idea what's going on, and you don't even know how much you don't know*.

Eren bit down on his hand, and lightning sparked. Everyone stared in silence and shock as the Titan appeared before their very eyes, letting out a battle cry full of power and rage.

Krista shivered. *He's terrifying*, she thought. It's *terrifying*. She frowned, and leaned just a bit closer. *I've never seen it up close before*, she thought. *I guess I still haven't. But there's something about it that's so famil—*

She hissed, fingertips flying to her temples. “Hey,” Ymir demanded. “What’s wrong?”

Krista blinked and shook her head, and the pain was gone. “Nothing,” she said with a smile. “Don’t worry about it.”

***It seems impossible to lift that boulder through the perspective of a human,* Mikasa thought. *But Eren probably has an undiscovered strength*.**

Mikasa looked away. Eren glanced at her, back to the screen, and back to her. His eyes widened. *Oh,* shit.

Eren stared at the boulder, before turning to look at Mikasa. *Eren?* She gasped and before she knew it, he raised his fist and threw a punch at her.

The room exploded in shouts as the screen went black.

Episode – 12. Wound: The Struggle for Trost, Part 8

"We've managed to corral most of the Titans in the corner furthest from the breach. Combat has been avoided as much as possible. But still, 20% of our forces are lost," Gustav told Pixis.

"No!" Connie leapt to his feet. "Hold on! Fucking wait!" He threw his arms into the air, waving them furiously at the screen. "You can't just cut away like that!"

Eren stared at the screen, feeling nauseous. *I already know*, he thought, glancing at Mikasa, who was firmly not meeting his gaze. He wasn't sure if he was relieved that her scar was on the cheek facing away from him or not. *It's something else, though, to see it*. He pursed his lips. *Why?* He looked down at his hands, balled into fists. *Is that just me?* he wondered. *Or is it something else?*

"Not lost," Pixis said. "They did not die of losing their way. They were sent to their deaths, by me." He looked over at the city, watching the smoke and aftermath of the destruction. "This is the threshold of our extinction, soldiers. If my actions ensure mankind's survival, history may call me 'Butcher' all it wants."

I've never thought about that. Jean frowned. *How are people going to remember us?* His gaze roamed over the shelves of books stacked against the walls. At least *some* of those had to be history books. *Are we in any?* he wondered. *Are these books even from our world?* He felt a pang of guilt. *I shouldn't care about this*, he thought. *But, still. . .* He thought about the nameless thousands marching out of Trost, and his stomach twisted. *Will they* even *remember us?*

Back at the boulder, Eren aimed a punch at Mikasa, but missed as she flipped away. His fist came in contact with the roof, sending debris flying. One of the pieces of debris sliced Mikasa's cheek as she slid away.

Sasha winced. *That's a terrible place to leave a scar*, she thought, rubbing her own cheek and imagining her skin raised and jagged beneath her finger. *She wouldn't even be able to forget it if she wanted to*.

She hit the chimney harshly, gasping out in pain. Ian's team rushed over, sweat dripping down their faces. Mikasa got up shakily, turning towards Eren.

Mikasa picked at a hangnail, all too aware of Eren's gaze burning into the side of her head. "It's not your fault," she said before he'd even had the chance to speak.

He wet his lips, and, for a second, she thought he was going to argue. "Still," was all he said in the end.

"Ackerman, look out!" Ian yelled as Eren prepared another punch. Mikasa jumped out of the way again. Shooting her hooks into the building behind Eren, placing herself on his nose.

Petra was, all of a sudden, hit with the memory of a massive, fleshy arm and heat that had seared her face even from three feet away. *If it comes to it*, she thought, swimming with a vague sense of disconnect, *we* will *kill him*.

Gunther glanced at the green-eyed boy out of the corner of his eye. It was only just starting to dawn on him how *wrong* so many things could have gone. Every test, every experiment, every joke gone wrong at dinner was a potential trigger, and they were, he realized, the only things in between the bullet and the rest of the world. And *fuck* if the magnitude of that weren't just starting to dawn on him.

He's still just a monster, isn't he? thought Oluo. *Just a tame one*. He pursed his lips, brow wrinkling. *But that's the problem, isn't it? 'Cause we don't know. And there's no way we'll ever know*.

"Ackerman, stand down! Get away from him, that's an order!" Ian yelled.

"Eren, I know you're in there, goddamn it!" Mikasa pleaded. "I know you recognize me! Come one! Snap the hell out of it, you need to plug the breach!"

He killed for her, thought Connie, *and now he's gonna kill her*. He was hit with the sudden, absurd urge to giggle. He took a hasty bite of the apple in his hand, and choked. Sasha smacked him on the back.

"We've failed," Rico lamented, grabbing a red signal flare and firing it. "It was foolish to pin our hopes on something we didn't truly understand."

But what else did we have? thought Armin desperately. It was hard, *so hard*, to remember that what they were seeing on screen had already happened—moments, words, actions, and deaths of the past. The fact that every second of that day was seared into the forefront of his mind—hazy memories and new vivid, technicolour details—wasn't helping.

Everything in the room—the air, the couches, the drapes that fluttered in an invisible wind that did not come from outside the window—carried a light, crisp smell that put in mind a cool spring breeze—a match that Armin thought apt to the pale blue of the walls. That, at least, was a blessing, however small.

At least he couldn't smell the smoke anymore.

"Eren! Listen to me! You're human!" Mikasa cried out, not noticing Eren balling his hand into another fist, shaking with rage.

Damnit, Jaeger. Ymir grimaced, clenching her jaw. *Why'd it have to be you, Jager?* She chewed on the inside of her cheek. *Why couldn't you have just been normal?*

Krista frowned, gently prying her hands open and lacing their fingers together. "You alright?" she asked.

Ymir didn't even have to put effort into her snort. "Watching this clusterfuck?" Her motions were stiff and jerky as she waved at the TV. "Who could be?"

“Ackerman, watch out!” Ian yelled out when he saw the fist. Mikasa jumped out of the way, making Eren punch himself in the face, crying out in a powerful roar. He fell to the ground, hands completely gone from the punching.

A chill ran up Moblit’s spine at the sight of the steaming stumps. *He’d have crushed her*, he thought. *Just. . .* bam.

“What the hell?” Mitabi whispered. “The kid’s a normal Titan?”

Yes, he is. Hange’s eyes were so wide their vision blurred when they leaned forwards. “But *why*?” they said aloud. “That’s the question no one’s asking!” They stabbed their pencil against the page to emphasize their point. “He never attacked humans before, even the first time! What changed?” Each exclamation was accompanied by a sharp assault against the notebook. “Circumstances? Location? The *air*?” *Stab, stab, stab*. “Was it psychological?” The next stab went through the notebook. “Oops.”

“Eren!”

Mike turned, looking over Levi’s head at the three Marians clustered on their couch. *Why just her?* he wondered. *Ian and Mitabi were there too, weren’t they?* He shook his head. *Maybe I’m reading too much into this*.

“Captain!” a soldier yelled out. “We’ve got two Titans bearing down on us at the front! Ten metre and six metre!”

“Heads up! There’s a 12 metre coming this way too!” Another one cried out.

“Ian, that’s it, please!” Mitabi said. “Just look at him, we need to get out of here! The plan’s a bust!”

“Yeah, full withdrawal,” Rico agreed. “We need to leave him as he is.”

But they didn’t. Reiner’s jaw locked.

Mikasa turned to them, eyes flaring with rage and deadly anger. Ian startled at her gaze, looking away.

“How did they stop him?” Connie wondered. “I mean, unless they already told us and I forgot?”

“How would you even get close enough to stop him?” Sasha asked.

“It was Armin,” said Mikasa immediately.

“I don’t remember,” said Eren at the same time.

“Seriously?” Jean scowled. “Don’t you remember *anything*?”

“Why don’t we stick you in a Titan and see what happens to your long-term memory?”

“I don’t know,” said Armin loudly. “I just. . . talked, I guess.”

“And that snapped him out of it?” Eld frowned.

Armin shrugged. “I don’t know,” he said. “It was all down to Eren, in the end.” *It always is*. He bit his lips.

“Red smoke, that’s not good,” a mustached soldier said from his place on the wall near Pixis. “Sir, I’m afraid this means the Elite Squad hit quite a snag.”

“This was pointless!” a soldier cried out, kneeling on the ground, head in hand. “My friends died like animals!”

How long’s it been? Erwin wondered, frowning. It was something else that bothered—which was the wrong word, but *confused* just didn’t seem right—him about the. . . well, *everything*.

Timeskips, Marco had said. Erwin wasn’t entirely sure what that word meant, but he was piecing together a pretty good idea. What about *their* time, though?

“Excuse me,” he said. “You. Omni. What about us?”

She lifted the book off her face, and frowned at him. “What?”

“Us,” Erwin repeated. “Our time. We’ve been here for hours—what do we say when we get back?”

“Oh.” Omni glanced at Marco. “Did I forget that?”

“Yeah.” The freckled boy looked slightly pained, as if this were something he’d gone through more times than he cared to think about.

“Right.” Most of the room had picked up on the conversation at this point, but most eyes remained glued to the TV. Erwin supposed he couldn’t fault them for that. Still, he was significantly more worried about their current predicaments than the past playing out on screen. “Yeah, you don’t need to worry about that,” said Omni. “Moment you’re done, we’ll send you back, to the exact second you were taken. Not even a blip in the timeline. Just like *that*—” she snapped her fingers. “No one will even know you were gone.”

“But—” The furrow between Erwin’s brows deepened. He was getting a headache. “We’ll be older, won’t we? They won’t notice that?”

Omni shrugged. “Few days, give or take. Again, no one will even notice. Shouldn’t be a problem, unless you get carsick.”

“Get what?”

“It’s *fine*,” Omni repeated. “Nothing to worry your little blonde head over.”

Erwin didn’t let up. It was annoying, Levi liked to say, his habit of “grabbing onto something and holding on like it’s a juicy bone or something, I thought Mike was supposed to be the dog, what the fuck Eyebrows,” even while he helped him comb through his files, but, well. . . “You can do that?” he asked, trying to keep his voice level. “Manipulate time?”

“Wouldn’t call it ‘manipulate,’” Omni muttered, turning back to her book. It seemed, astoundingly, to be comprised entirely out of pictures. Pictures, and the oddest scrap of words in tiny bubbles. “Like. . .” She snapped her fingers for a moment as she thought, eyes never leaving the page. “Shit, what was that analogy Luna used?” She pinched the bridge of her nose, squeezing her eyes shut. “Boat!” Her eyes flew open. “Boat! Think of it like a boat,” she said. “The little ones, yeah? And time’s like a river. Right now, you’ve tied your boat to the bank, and

you're wandering around somewhere, but you can still get back in anytime you like. Make sense?"

"Perfectly," said Erwin with a polite smile. She nodded idly and turned back to her book.

Of course, thought Erwin as he turned back to the screen. *But what would happen if you tried to paddle upstream?*

"No! Look over there!"

"What happened?"

"They've failed!"

Armin walked over, an expression of worry on his face.

"It's over," said Marco. "They failed."

"But how?" Armin whispered in shock. He grit his teeth, the turned and ran, leaving his extra gas canisters.

"Your gas!" Sasha exclaimed.

Petra whipped around, eyes wide. "Did you just *run* to the vanguard?"

"I—" Armin stuttered, cheeks flushing. "I just needed to go—get to them," he said. "I was worried. I didn't—" He wet his lips. "I mean, well—I was already done at the warehouse, and. . ." He trailed off awkwardly. "Yeah."

"That was really brave of you," Petra told him. "Seriously. There aren't many people who'd do that."

"Armin! Where are you going?"

"Commander, I recommend we revert back to defending the gate," the soldier from before said. "Just give the word, sir."

"We can't."

"Should I get the Elite Squad to retreat?"

"Why haven't they already?" asked Connie. "Not that they should," he added hastily. "But Rico and the others seemed ready to bolt."

"Ian," said Mikasa, lips twitching faintly.

"Absolutely not," said Pixis. "Continue luring the enemy to the edge of town. The Elite Squad is well-helmed. They can make their own decisions. We proceed with the plan, or this will all have been for nothing. I will allow those at the vanguard to decide if and when we deviate. We cannot deliver a verdict of defeat, but we can fight to the last breath. It's humanity's debt. It's what we owe the fallen."

Sure, thought Jean. *Great sentiment. And it worked, this time. But that was practically a fluke. It was only dumb luck that we succeeded—dumb luck and timing, and luck*. He grimaced. *What happens when you start paying back more than you owe?*

“Ian, snap out of it! What are you waiting for?” Mitabi yelled. “Conserve all the manpower we have! This is the right call! It’s not like this is your fault! Come on! Look, this was doomed from the start! We did the best we could! But all we have left is to go over the Wall!” Mikasa glared, going after him with her swords bared.

That’s the second time she’s done that, thought Levi. His fingers twitched. *Probably not even.* He glanced at her out of the corner of narrowed eyes. *She’s an idiot*, he decided. *A strong one.* He scowled. *Not just an idiot, then. She’s a fucking liability. A threat, even*.

“Stop!” Ian blocked her, “Easy, now is not the time. Rico, take the 12 metre that’s coming from behind! Mitabi and I will handle the other two.”

“Are you nuts?” Rico almost screamed, eyes wide.

Connie couldn’t help but agree. “I can’t help but agree,” he said. “I don’t *want* to, but—you know what I mean, right?”

“‘Course,” Sasha muttered. “But—well, I get Ian, too.” *I don’t know who’s side I’m on, though*.

“Have you forgotten that I’m in charge?” Ian retaliated. “Now, do as you are told! We are *not* leaving Jaeger defenseless, period. Our change of plan is to keep the others away from him until he can be recovered. Whether you like it or not, he is our last best chance. We won’t abandon him easily. We’re expendable, he isn’t. He can’t just be replaced.”

Reiner nearly burst out laughing right then and there. He crossed his arms tightly over his chest, clenching his teeth until he was sure he would break his jaw. *If only we were so lucky*, he thought bitterly.

Irreplaceable. What a joke.

“He’s a failure who has caused countless soldiers to die!” Rico protested. “Just look at him! Are you saying you want us all to die saving that?”

“That’s right, down to the last man! If that’s what it takes, then so be it!”

We’re expendable, he isn’t. Eren supposed he should have been used to the clammy, sticky feeling crawling around the inside of his stomach at this point. Or maybe it was good that he could still feel bad about it.

They shouldn’t be, he thought. *They* aren’t*. But. . . they are?* He muffled a groan in his palms as he dragged his hands down his face. *Shit*.

Back at the corner of town, Jean latched onto the Wall and ran over to his friends.

“What’s with the red smoke? What happened to him?”

“I don’t know,” Marco replied. “Armin’s gone to see. But I think it’ll be alright.”

“Yeah?”

“Of course! I mean, this is Eren we’re talking about.”

“Is it stupid to think that things were easier when this was actually happening?” asked Connie. “Not that I *want* to go through that again,” she added with a shudder. “But—” she

clenched her fists in her laps, knuckles white. “Well, it just felt. . . faster. This—seeing everything, hearing everyone’s thoughts, being taken through it all over again. . . I know we’re safe, but it just feels so much worse.”

Petra grimaced. “I can’t fault you there,” she said. *I was barely on screen for a few minutes, but it still felt so weird*. She shook her head. *And we haven’t even seen some of the worse things from our own Expeditions yet*.

Maybe things would get better, she thought.

She wasn’t so naïve as to believe herself.

“Right. . .”

“I don’t want to be that guy, but this whole thing seems kind of pointless,” Connie admitted, looking down.

“Hell, when’s the last time a fight against the Titans didn’t feel like that, huh?” Jean replied. “The best thing now? Do what we can to prevent losing any more.”

Mike raised his eyebrows. *That’s different. I thought he was just a pessimist*. He glanced over his shoulder with a sniff. *Not bad, though, that mindset—just realistic enough to not be stupid, but still positive enough to get up and keep going.*

“I don’t like the idea of so many of us being dead for nothing,” said Connie.

“We have to pick our battles! If we want to wage all-out war someday, we have to conserve all the manpower we can! This was the right call.” Jean said. “Just be patient.”

“‘All-out war?’” Erwin repeated.

Jean, surprisingly, did not look too nervous from being put on the spot. “Well, that’s the point, right?” he said. “That’s what we’re going for?” He looked around the room. A distressing number of blank faces stared back at him. “Come on,” he said. “We literally call it *the war*. And you don’t win one by killing three Titans and calling it a day.”

“No, you’re right,” said Erwin. *I just wasn’t expecting him to pick up on it—and so quickly, too.*

He’s perceptive, thought Levi. *Now we just wait to see if that comes back to bite him—or us—in the ass later on*.

“Was it though?” Connie asked.

“It was!”

“Well, let’s just try not to become one of the losses ourselves, all of us,” Connie said, smiling nervously.

“Ian! You can’t be serious!” Rico protested.

“What other hope against the Titans do we have? You know something I don’t? This is all we got and you damn well know it, I’m making a judgment call here! If you have a better plan, speak up! How else are we going to get out from under their feet?”

What would have happened, thought Armin, *if Rico had been in charge? Or Mitabi? Would he still have argued in Eren's favour? Would they have listened?* Another thought came to him, one he wasn't planning to share with the others any time soon. *What if they* had *left? Taken the forces somewhere else? What would have happened to Eren? Mikasa wouldn't have left him, obviously, but then. . . what would have happened to* her*?*

"If you're asking me how else we'll defeat the Titans, I obviously have no idea."

"See? That's why we can't afford to beat a retreat, not yet. We may not know what else is in there, but there's hope! As long as that's the case, we will fight to the bitter end! Look at us, always scraping by, always on the run. Don't you want it to be over? Don't you want to take a stand? Well, this is how it's done!" Mikasa looked over at Ian, who looked back at her.

Eren wanted to feel motivated. Really, he did. Instead, all he felt was empty. *This wouldn't have happened, if I'd just done my job*, he thought, furious with himself. *What the hell's wrong with me? I got the easiest task, and I couldn't even do that right. No—I made things* worse. He clenched his jaw. *Would Ian have died if they hadn't wasted so much time getting me back on my feet?* he wondered. *Would Mitabi? Those other Garrison?* There was an itch in his chest, tugging at his heart, but he didn't turn around. *Marco?*

"This is madness. . ." Rico grit her teeth and walked away.

"Rico!"

"I'll follow your strategy," she said. "I think you're right. If we're to stand, this is the only way. Let the bastards taste humanity's wrath. My team will address the 12 metre coming in from behind." She took off, and Mitabi went the other direction.

"She's not a bad person," Eld told Mikasa, noticing the fiery look that still lingered on her face. "I know you probably feel like she is, but she's not wrong, either. Neither of you are. Those are just the facts." Maybe it wasn't necessary, but it still felt important to say, anyways.

"She didn't die," said Mikasa stonily.

"That's not all that matters," Gunther said, and left it at that.

"Let's go, we need to take out the two coming in front," said Mitabi to Ian, patting him on the shoulder."

"Right."

"They're a good team," said Moblit. *Were. Were a good team*. He grinned ruefully. *But, for now, we can still pretend*.

"Thank you, Captain," Mikasa said.

"No need, Ackerman. Honestly, I was more scared of what you might have done otherwise."

So was I, thought Jean. It felt like a betrayal, almost, admitting it, even if it was just to himself, but he couldn't deny the truth. And, as much as he hated it (And never let it be said that he *didn't* hate it, because he did. He hated knowing about it, hated the fact that it had

happened, hated the fact that every time he thought about it, all he could think was *I wish I didn't know that*, hated that he had, somehow, managed to, in his mind, make it all about him), there was a part of him that would always whisper *she would*.

"Continue as before!" said Ian. "You're free to do what you see fit with those skills of yours."

"Yes, sir!"

"This is to protect your boyfriend, after all."

Mikasa turned bright red and Ymir choked on air. Eren had a strange look on his face, and stared blankly at the screen as Connie wheezed.

"Sina save us," Jean groaned.

Mikasa blushed, looking down. "He's family."

"Why can't they ever assume *that* first?" asked Gunther.

Eld shrugged. "You have to admit, they look like it," he said.

Gunther wrinkled his nose, looking mildly disturbed at the notion. "I *guess*."

Ian took off as Mikasa turned back to Eren. *Huh? Why haven't his injuries recovered? Did the earlier damage compromise him?*

"*Ooh*, could it have?" Hange cocked their head. "We've never seen that in any other Titans."

"Great," Levi deadpanned. "We got the handicap."

Oh, Eren*, thought Mikasa. *What's this doing to you? Oh, god, what if you won't be able to change back. No, I need to stop. I'm just thinking too much into it, that's all. I need to focus!

On the Wall, Armin was making his way over. *Eren, Mikasa. What happened to you two?*

Inside the nape, Eren laid completely still, his eyes half lidded.

A hush fell over the room.

"So that's what it looks like." Hange's glasses slipped down their nose, and they quickly shoved them back up again. "Moblit!" they exclaimed. "Moblit, are you getting this?!"

"I'm *trying*!" His hand faltered. He couldn't seem to tear his eyes away from the screen. "That's just—wow. That's. . . *wow*."

Sasha tried to follow the lines of muscle wrapped around Eren, but even her skilled hunter's eyes couldn't follow them. "Roots," she said. "They look like roots." *Or chains*. She didn't say that part out loud.

Petra shivered. "It's so red," she said.

"It really is just like that, isn't it?" said Eld. "Shoved in there, I mean." Phantom heat from memories of battles long past scorched his skin, and he shivered.

"It looks suffocating," said Krista quietly. Ymir's hand found hers and she held on. She wasn't sure who was squeezing tighter.

"I've never seen it like that before," said Bertolt quietly. *He almost looks like he's dead*, he thought. *Do we look that peaceful when we're in there?* he wondered. *No, I don't think we do*.

He's having a dream. We're living a nightmare.

***Th-thump. Th-thump*. A heart beat gently in the dark.**

"At least we know he's alive," said Connie uneasily.

"We *know* he's alive, idiot," said Jean, not quite managing to mask the disconcertment in his own voice. "He's sitting right there!"

Eren's eye was shown, blank and almost unseeing. As the camera zoomed in, his pupil began to dilate.

ODM Gear Weight Shifting Equipment, Part 3

One's full body weight is shifted onto one side of the waist or the other. As such, although similar to soaring through the air, ODM overtaxes all of the muscles of the body.

Too true. Mike winced, rubbing his shoulders. It had been a day, at least (Who knew how time passed in this place? He sure as fuck didn't), since he'd even used ODM to train, and he'd even stretched afterwards, but his back was still throbbing. *Shit. I'm getting old*.

ODM Gear Weight Shifting Equipment, Part 4

Due to this, instructors cut lifelines during training to observe cadet's reactions. This training is hardly safe but anyone who can't survive training is unfit to battle Titans.

"Do they?" Hange frowned.

"Yeah," said Sasha. "They didn't do that when you were there?"

"We had it," Petra chimed in. "I thought it was something they'd always done."

"Not when I was there, they didn't," said Hange.

"It was the pressure after Wall Maria, I'd guess," said Erwin. "Keith must have taken it upon himself."

Moblit frowned. "What does that part mean, 'can't survive training?'"

The younger recruits exchanged uneasy looks, and Oluo muttered something under his breath, clasping his arms for a brief moment before dropping them again. "Oh," said Moblit, a memory from an earlier episode surfacing. "Right. Sorry."

***Where am I?* Eren's voice mustered out, sounding weak. *What am I doing? Am I sitting? I can't see. What day is it?* Eren's point of view was shown, a blurry dark mess where nothing could be made out.**

All of sudden, the darkness changed to a dreamlike state of his childhood home.

"What?"

Mikasa and Carla dried dishes as Grisha sat the table, reading a newspaper. Eren's child-self sat on a chair in his old living room, a blanket wrapped around his body.

"*What*?"

He blinked his eyes sleepily, trying to make sense of his surroundings. *Oh, that's right, of course.* He yawned, eyes lidded with sleepiness as he shuffled his blanket back onto his shoulders. *Weird.*

"For once, I agree," said Sasha.

"Is that a hallucination?" asked Hange.

"Why childhood, though?" asked Krista.

"When everything was easier?" Petra suggested. "Safety? Comfort?"

"Wait, let me guess," said Jean. "You don't remember this, either."

"Eat me, Kirschtein."

Meanwhile in the real world, Armin reached Eren and Mikasa. He stood on a roof, panting as he observed the situation in shock. "Eren," he breathed out. "What are you doing? Wake up!"

"Here's the plan: we don't let a single one of these ugly SOBs walk out of this corner," a soldier told Jean and the others. "Focus on keeping them here. Understood? Don't engage in combat unless you absolutely need to. I want you on the ground, three cadets per team. When you reach the Wall, jump. Is that clear? Die and you'll piss me off. If a Titan goes astray, we'll get him down."

"What, in teams of three?" Oluo snorted. "Please. They've got a higher chance of survival just running naked down the streets."

"What else are they going to do?" Eld shrugged. "It's a solid plan, for what they've got."

Oluo sniffed. "It's a miracle they survived."

Petra glared at him and hit him on the arm, hard, accompanied by a sharp jerk of her head towards the back of the room.

"What do you mean *if*? It's not like we can count on them to follow protocol," Jean sneered in a whisper.

"What if our situation gets risky?" Annie spoke up. "Are we free to act at our own discretion, or what?"

Annie clenched her fists, looking away from her on-screen counterpart. Unfortunately, she chose to turn to the left, and her gaze fell on—

Well.

"Whatever'll make it easier for you," the soldier answered. They looked over as two loud sounds appeared, along with billows of smoke. "Team Kirschstein, move out!"

"Yes, sir!"

Over near Eren, Mitabi and Ian managed to take down one of the two Titans. The other reached out for Mitabi, but Mikasa came down on its nape, killing it.

"Son of a bitch, it's behind us!" Ian yelled, looking over at a large Titan that had managed to climb onto the roof.

"It's a 13 metre! And from the looks of it, it's trying to pounce on Jaeger!"

"Heads up! We got four more coming from the gate! All of them 10 metres at least!"

"That's a fucking *swarm*," Jean exclaimed. "Whatever you're gonna do, Armin, you better do it quick."

"Right," Ian said. "Rear, Ackerman! Yours!"

"Sir!"

"Keep it away from him at all costs! Hold the rest off here!"

"Will do!"

Elite or not, two teams can't take on four Titans at once,* Mikasa thought as she dug her hooks into one of the Titans, slicing through its nape as its face hit the roof. *What's going on? Where are they coming from all of a sudden? There aren't enough of us to attract this many! Unless. . .* Her eyes widened. *They're coming for Eren!

Levi frowned. *From that far?*

There's got to be a range, thought Hange. On a fresh page (there must have been something magical about the notebook—they'd have ran out of paper a couple dozen times by now, normally), they drew a stick-Titan, then a large circle surrounding it. *Smaller than Trost*—they scribbled a quick note in the margin –*larger than a street*. They frowned. *Well, it's a start*.

"Mikasa!" Armin yelled out, "Why did the plan go belly-up?"

"Armin?"

"Why on earth is he slumped over like this?"

"Get away!" Mikasa yelled. "It's dangerous! Something went wrong and he lost control and ended up like this! I tried to snap him out of it, but he wouldn't respond! He's been out like this for the past few minutes!"

"Has it only been a few minutes?" wondered Gunther. "It feels like it's been so much longer."

"'Cause it has been, for us," said Eld.

Gunther shook his head. "I still can't wrap my head around that," he said. "It's crazy. All of this—" he waved a hand around the room, "—is insane. I mean, could you even imagine telling someone back home about this?"

Eld snorted. "You'd probably get locked up."

"Shot, more like."

"But the plan?"

“We’ve had to shift tack! Right now, all we can do is protect him! He’s defenseless and there are just too many! I don’t know how much longer we can keep this up!”

It doesn’t sound like much, four, thought Moblit. *It never* is *much, in stories. But I guess that’s just another thing you get desensitized to in the Corps*. He shifted, rolling his shoulders until they popped. *Stories.* He leaned back against the couch, laying his sketchbook on his lap. *How long’s it been since I heard one that doesn’t make me want to scratch my eyes out?*

Armin looked back at Eren, recalling the earlier events when Eren first emerged from his Titan. Armin walked over towards the nape. “From the back of the head to the nape of the neck, one metre high and ten centimetres across,” he recited, taking out his swords.

“What are you doing?” asked Connie.

Jean elbowed him. “Just *wait*.”

“Armin!”

“I’m pulling him out of here! Just hold off the other Titans as long as you can!”

“But—”

Clever. Erwin smiled. *Very, very clever*.

“When Eren emerged from the Titan, it was from the weak spot.” He shot his hooks on either side of the nape, holding himself steady. “I don’t know, but something tells me that’s a big part of the picture.” He gripped his sword, beads of sweat going down his face. “How these damn things work, it’ll be alright. As long as I don’t hit the centre! This won’t kill him, but it’s gonna hurt!” He dug his sword into the nape with a loud cry.

“Holy *shit*!” Gunther exclaimed.

“No!” Mikasa screamed. The sword pierced through Eren’s arm, and his eyes flew open in shock. His Titan let out a powerful roar, and thrashed around madly. “Stop it! You’ll get yourself killed!”

“Sorry,” Armin said to Eren sheepishly.

Eren forced himself to grin. “Hey,” he said, nudging him lightly, “what’re you apologizing for? You just saved the Walls!”

Armin let himself grin weakly. “Yeah,” he said. “Yeah, I—I guess. . . I did?”

“I’m fine! Just do what you can to keep the rest at bay! Trust me, there are tons of other people you should be worried about! Leave Eren to me and go do what you do best!”

Mikasa grit her teeth, then turned and ran.

“Eren,” said Armin, “can you hear me? You’ve got to pull it together!”

Inside the nape, Eren lay completely still as he did before, Armin’s voice sounding distant. “If you stay like this, we’re all going to die! Whatever this body is doing to you, fight it! You’re Eren Jaeger, damn it! What’s this steaming lump of flesh have on you, huh?”

***What is he talking about? Fight it? What? I’m tired,* Eren thought.**

Eren’s frown deepened. *What the hell?*

"Are you sure that's Eren?" The effect of the joke was slightly dampened by the unsettled look on Sasha's face.

"Come on, dammit! Wake up! We need you, Eren!" Armin was panting with panic, hitting the nape with his fist desperately. "Your mom, remember? Remember what they did to her? You were bent on avenging her death! You swore to massacre the Titans!" Back in the dream-like state, child-Armin was right outside the window beside Eren, banging madly on the glass. Eren looked over at his friend, confusion on his tired face.

"If Eren's not fully awake right now," said Hange, working through their thoughts, then that means this is just a fabrication by his subconscious, right?" *But that doesn't make sense either*, they thought. *Eren Jaeger eats, breathes, and sleeps fighting Titans. Surely that should apply here, too?* They dragged their hands through their hair. *Could the Titan be fighting back?* they wondered. *Maybe there's some sort of natural hallucinogenic produced inside the nape! Or maybe Eren doesn't* really *hate Titans?* They considered the idea for a moment, tossing it from hand to metaphorical hand, then tossed it over their metaphysical shoulder. *Nah*, they almost snorted. *Not in a thousand years*.

"You're not making any sense Armin," Eren said. "Open your eyes. Mom's not dead." He looked over to where his mother stood, drying dishes with Mikasa.

"How could you not remember that?" Jean demanded.

"I don't *know*!" Eren looked like he was teetering on the edge between rage and panic, and was very close to taking a running jump, and to hell to where he landed. He felt it, too. *What* is *this?*

"Eren! Eren! Please! Snap out of it! I know you're in there, please listen to me! If you don't get a move on, the Titans are going to kill us!"

"Armin, seriously. What the hell has gotten into you? What's with this 'get a move on' crap? I don't want to move anything. This right here's good enough for me."

"You've never been okay with that," said Mikasa quietly. "Not once in your whole life."

Eren nodded slowly. *Right?*

All of a sudden, his tired eyes opened wide, his expression changing. "*It's not like I want to be a Scout*." Carla turned back to look at him, a warm expression on her face.

The silence was almost louder than the shouting. Eren wanted to scream.

Back in the real world, a Titan lifted a soldier to its mouth, chomping down on him. Jean watched, teeth grit.

"Fantastic. Well, like it or not, we're on our own now!" Annie shouted, running alongside Jean.

Annie dragged her fingers along her palms. Reiner was looking at her, demanding she meet his gaze with everything but words.

She didn't.

Mikasa ran forwards, watching a Titan bring up a soldier to its mouth.

"You're mine!" Ian screamed as he sliced the nape. The Titan fell, blood spurting everywhere.

"Yeah, that's what I thought you bastard!" Mitabi yelled. They looked over at another Titan. It brought its hand up. They managed to get out of the way as the Titan slammed its hand down onto the roof.

"Withdraw a little!"

"Ackerman reporting back, joining Team Mitabi!" Mikasa said as she jumped, blades raised.

At least she didn't run back, thought Levi. *Looks like it's authority she has trouble with, then.* He frowned. *Not hers, though. Just us*.

Connie dodged a swipe from a Titan, lodging his hook into a wall. Only, the hook didn't lodge, falling to the ground. "Huh?" The Titan reached out for Connie, before Jean cut its hand with his hook. "Jean!"

"You're supposed to be getting over the Wall!" Marco didn't know whether to laugh or groan.

"Get out of there!" Jean yelled, turning to run. *I'm sick and tired of people dying because of me!*

Jean grimaced at the sound of his own voice. 'Course, it was all fun and games until his own thoughts were broadcast for all to. . . well, hear.

While the Titan was distracted, Jean clicked his triggers trying to turn them on. Nothing happened as he looked down, sweat dripping down his face.

"Oh, Rose, no," Petra gasped.

Gunther shivered. He'd had nightmares about Jean's exact situation, and they'd always ended with his bloody corpse and the rest of the barracks' sudden, loud awakening. Obviously, though, Jean had made it out. *How?*

"What? Why is it failing me now?!" A chubby Titan appeared behind him, its shadow looming over him. Jean managed to get out of the way. Annie and Connie managed to reach the wall, looking back at Jean.

Annie took a loud, harsh sip of lemonade, then put the glass down on their table with a *thunk*. The drink was sour on her tongue, and it prickled at the bile in the back of her throat.

"Jean!" Connie yelled. "What the hell is he doing? Why won't he use his gear? No way, don't tell me it's damaged!"

"I'm not going to die today!" He ran into a building. Furniture was strewn around inside and an uneaten dinner sat abandoned on the table. Jean slumped against the wall, sweating. "Way to go, dragging everyone down," he snarled to himself. "Good job." He

looked out the window, seeing a Titan walk down the street. He looked towards the other side of the street, seeing a dead soldier that had been crushed by a boulder. Their gear glimmered, and Jean's eyes widened. "Huh. Maybe I won't die today."

Marco frowned. *Gear?*

Back with Armin, his voice turned softer. "Eren. *Eren*. Eren, please. Remember when we were kids? All we talked about was the outside." Dream-Armin had stopped banging on the window, and instead had a small smile on his face.

There it is. Mike grinned. *The key*.

Dream-Eren looked up, eyes widening. "You know," said Armin, "beyond the Walls. Frozen tundra that stretches to the skies." A picture of the tundra was shown, colourful lights like ribbons in the sky.

Sasha's glass clattered to the ground, throwing juice across the carpet. Nobody noticed.

Connie wanted to say something. Had to say something, *needed* to say something, needed to like he needed air, or food, or Sasha, or water, needed to put it into words. Needed to say something, anything, because if he kept it inside himself for any longer he was going to burst. Needed to make a speech like Eren could, turn the wild, bouncing thoughts into his head into something coherent, something *understandable*—but how could he? How could anyone, looking at something like that?

A picture, Sunny had lectured him one night, during the artist funk she'd ridden for about a week between her soldier and her princess phases, *can tell a thousand words*. He'd snickered beneath Martin's wild applause at the time, watching her parade around in the old smock and holding the paintbrush aloft like a banner, and laughed out loud when their mother found out what she'd done with her best dress.

He owed her an apology, he supposed.

"I didn't think there was that much snow in the world," he finally managed, voice hoarse as if he'd been screaming (inside, maybe, he had been).

He'd never had a thousand words to begin with. Looking at this, he didn't need them.

"*Sand dunes.*" A desert was shown, curves of sand for miles away.

Krista dragged in a deep breath. The room was silent, maybe more silent than it had ever been, but, still, she imagined she could hear every individual heartbeat, pounding like an army of drums, screaming, singing, sighing at the images in front of them. They looked flat, she realized, and oddly lifeless on the screen.

The screen. The beautiful, horrible, amazing, fantastic screen she'd so hated staring at before this. It had been too much, she'd thought. Too bright, too loud, too *real*. Like the Titans could reach their hands right through the glass and crush her in their fists, like the blood could burst forth and splatter them in hot, hot red, like the floor would shake every time the earth rumbled in the past.

Not for this, though. The Titans were an image; the landscapes were a world. A world at their fingertips, almost literally, a world just out of their reach, a world she was seeing.

Deserts, they'd been taught, were death. Simple as that. Caught in a desert? You're dead. Fighting in a desert? Dead. Marching through a desert? Maybe less dead, but still best to hurry up, but not too quickly, make sure to conserve your water, no, Hans, you should not drink your own urine, no, Hans, not your horse's urine, either, why would you even ask that?

Not this, though. She could see the stars twinkling, in the image, shimmering behind clouds like gossamer hung in the sky, the shift and ripple of the sands with every icy midnight breeze, the dunes twisting and curling beneath the crystal-dotted black like waves upon the fabled sea.

A desert was not always death. This one was made of life. She dragged her fingers over the twisted strands of the rug like she could feel the fine white grains beneath her skin—

Ashes beneath the scraped, black soles of her feet like sand, falling through her fingers like the thinnest earth, burning her eyes when she buried her face in the ridges and screamed, grey and crumbling and alive, every flake and speck.

A world dancing behind a veil.

Almost dreamily, she reached forwards, fingers hovering in front of herself, like she could rip it down and step through the arch.

A hand seized her wrist, rough, calloused fingers curling around hers. She started, jaw clacking with the force of it.

Ymir's lips were bitten ragged, knuckles white despite her gentle grip. She swallowed with a loud *click* that made Krista's throat hurt just listening to it. "Blocking the view," she said, dragging her hand into her lap, voice raspy.

"*Oceans, forests. . .*" The other two terrains were shown, glistening in the sunlight.

Impossible. That was it, that was the word. No—*improbable*.

But there it was, wasn't it? Right there, plain as day, clear as night, right in front of him.

Right in front of him, like it always should have been.

Erwin curled his fists in his lap. He'd expected this, he reminded himself. It only made sense; they had to see it, at some point. He should be taking notes, or drawing pictures, or making theories, or anything but *staring*.

But Hange was taking notes, and Moblit could draw far better than he could. Mike could fill in any gaps in his memory later, and Levi had no doubt already figured out exactly how he was going to complain about the sand when they got there.

Surely, he thought, *the Titans haven't taken over the whole world?* And yes, he realized, excitement mounting, *it made sense*. How could a burning beast live in the snow? Make its way through the woods? Swim through the bottomless blue depths, walk across the desert?

Is this what you wanted me to see, father?

“The world my parents wanted to see.” Armin’s voice was soft, his eyes distant. “I’d always thought you’d outgrown that dream. I was kind of sad it didn’t come up. But then I realized you’d let it go because you didn’t want me to join the Scouts.”

“No,” said Eren, “I just—"

Armin threw his arms around his neck, burying his face in his shoulder. His own shoulders were shaking—rumbling, really, Eren should say, or rocketing, because *shaking* far from covered it—with tears. Or was it laughter?

No, Eren realized—laughter *and* sobs.

“Armin?” His hand hovered cautiously over Armin’s shoulder for a moment before he finally touched it. Armin laughed into his shirt, arms squeezing tight enough to choke (Eren tried very hard not to).

“I didn’t know,” he whispered. “I didn’t know what they *looked* like, I didn’t know—” He drew back, dragging in a deep, rattling breath and forcefully scrubbing at the tear tracks on his cheeks. “Just pictures,” he muttered, grinding the heel of his hand into his eye. “Just pictures, that’s all. Sketches, really.” He laughed weakly, breath shuddering. “Nothing solid, nothing *real*. Colours, Eren!” He grinned up at him through red eyes and quivering lips. “And light. It’s so—”

“Simple,” said Mikasa quietly. “I thought—I thought it would be big. Grand. Palaces carved into mountains and trees bearing gold. Stuff from storybooks.” Storybooks they’d been raised on, she didn’t add. “But it’s not that.” Her eyes never once left the screen, the crashing waves reflected in rings of grey. “It’s just *real*,” she said. “And, somehow. . . that’s better?”

“No,” Dream-Eren whispered. “I just. . .” He stood, and his blanket fell to the ground.

Should have stayed down. Reiner’s head dropped, mouth a thin line. *Should have stayed down the first time*. He bit the inside of his lip. *Not much good this’ll do you*.

“Tell me, honestly. Even though your first step beyond the Walls would be hell on earth, gambling against the possibility of dying like my parents. Why throw caution to the wind and venture outside?”

Why? Levi grinned humourlessly. *‘Cause it’s life, kid, that’s why*.

“What kind of question is that? Don’t play dumb, you know damn well why. Because the world beyond the Wall is my birthright!” He glared with determination as his house erupted into flames, his family turning into ashes behind him.

In the real world, Eren’s Titan let out a soft growl.

Episode – 13. Primal Desires: The Struggle for Trost, Part 9

Marco had never been this far down before.

Down, *technically*, because from here there was, quite literally, nowhere else to go but up.

"Contingency," Jamie from orientation had said when he'd asked. "Some people we'd rather keep contained, you know?"

"No," Marco had said, and they'd slapped him upside the head with a throaty chuckle before wandering away, humming under their breath.

The branches were twisted places, both figuratively and literally. It had been mind-boggling, even nauseating, the first time he'd made the mistake of taking a wander on his own. Most days, now, he got by with only minor vertigo.

("Timelines," Riley had explained, almost apologetically, as he'd patted his back. "Leftover universe stuff floating around. You'll get used to it." Marco had retched miserably, head clamped tightly between his knees. "Jake said oranges help, if you want."

"What--" Marco had squeezed his eyes shut, clenching his jaw as another wave of nausea crashed over him. "What the *hell* is an orange?")

Sometimes, it felt like a maze. Other times, it felt like walking into a tunnel that was somehow simultaneously upside down and inside-out and never really ended. And, in a few, blessed periods in between, he would walk through a spot that was *just right* and be able to breathe again.

Navigation, he'd decided early on, was hell. He'd asked for a map, once, and Omni had nearly choked laughing. "Just roll with it, kid," she'd said when she'd finally calmed down. "Trust me. Why do you think we've got limits?"

Broken windows between here and nowhere. Floors that vanished beneath your feet, and staircases that twirled up for miles. Hallways that never ended and doors that opened to solid walls.

And, apparently, his past.

Suffice it to say that he'd never been this far *in* before.

Crossing timelines was bad; he had no claim on his anymore, not even a body to go back to. "No books," the angry instructor with the seven eyes had said, marching back and forth in front of the room. "No shows. Don't even *think* about trying to find your people. And, for the love of all that is good, *stay away from the ice cream machine*."

Whoopee! He'd done three!

His head throbbed and he groaned, leaning forwards. His forehead bonked the mirror, the glass refreshingly cool against the almost feverish burn beneath his skin.

Something was terribly wrong.

The inside of a house was shown, furniture strewn about and the dinner on the table left abandoned.

Ran? Eld wondered. *Or dead?* The thought wasn't without dread, but it wasn't the sick horror he used to feel, either. It was a routine question at this point, and one they'd all had to ask at some point—even the kids.

Oluo leaned over the Gunther. "Didn't we just see this?" he asked in an undertone. The other man shrugged.

Jean sat slumped against the wall, heavily panting. "Way to go. Dragging everyone down, great job," he muttered to himself.

Sasha frowned. "You didn't say that last time," she said.

Jean shrugged, a glower fixed on the face. "Maybe I did, maybe I didn't," he said, scowling at the TV. "Don't know. Whole thing's creepy."

"Well," said Sasha, "that doesn't matter, because it's wrong."

Jean shrugged listlessly. "Sure."

He looked out the window, seeing a Titan walk down the street. He looked over to the other side, seeing the corpse of a soldier. He stared at the ODM on the corpse. "Huh, maybe I won't die today."

"See?" Sasha smacked Jean's shoulder. "You're smart! Who else would've thought of that? Right, Marco?" She looked up at the dark-haired boy, and her smile faltered. "Marco?"

Jean twisted around. "You okay?" he asked, frowning.

Marco's head was clenched between his hands, his fingers dragging roughly over his temples. "Mm," he forced out, squeezing his eyes shut. Jean put a hesitant hand on his shoulder and he stiffened before relaxing with an effort that was almost painful. "Kinda—" he shook his head and winced again. "It's—"

Get his gear!

An explosion on the screen rocked the room and his friends' heads jerked back up. In the chaos of the past battle, the groan that slipped through Marco's lips went unheard.

On the other side of the city, Rico landed on a roof gritting her teeth. A subordinate landed beside her, eyes wide in fear.

"What are we going to do, Captain?" the soldier asked as they watched a comrade get eaten in front of them. "We're all that's left!"

Eren paled. "Already?" Krista asked, alarmed. "But it's only been—"

"Walls above," Petra muttered.

"We fall back to the boulder!" Rico ordered.

Mikasa and the others made their way to some houses near the gate. They watched as a horde of Titans entered through.

“Status report!”

“Five Titans approaching from the gate, sir!”

Sasha shook her head, “It’s moving so fast,” she groaned. “Sina, it’s crazy.”

“I know.” Connie nodded fervently. “I don’t know what’s going on, and I was *there*.”

Sasha hesitated for a second. “Is it bad,” she asked slowly, “that I—well, I feel like it’s better? No, it’s not like that!” she hastened to add, seeing the looks on her friends’ faces. “I just—it was hell, the first time. I’m just glad we don’t have to. . . well. Not the whole thing, at least.”

Jean was silent. Finally, Connie sighed. “You’re nuts,” he told her. “But I guess I am to, ‘cause I can’t argue with that.”

Back with Jean, the Titan that had been walking down the street began walking the other way. Jean watched hesitantly, waiting for the Titan to be far enough away. Once he’d assessed it was safe, he ran out of the house, running over towards the gear.

Despite himself, Moblit leaned forwards, hands tightening around his pencil. “He’ll be massacred!” he hissed, forgetting, for a moment, that Jean was sitting barely ten feet away from him, unscathed.

“He’s ground meat either way,” said Hange. “At least he’s doing something instead of just sitting around.”

“If I wait for the all-clear, I’ll never make it out alive!” Jean whispered to himself as he began to take off the dead soldier’s gear. “I’ve got to do something!”

That’s if there’s anyone around to give the all-clear in the first place, thought Levi grimly. The screen was a mess, the streets it showed looked more like the unholy union of the Titan wilds and the deepest, caved-in tunnels of the Underground than what he’d once known to be Trost, but one thing was abundantly clear: whatever guard, whatever superiors the kids had had were either red spots on the walls or swimming in vats of Titan stomach acid. *They’re on their own*.

“Jean!” Connie yelled as he and Annie watched him struggle to get the gear off. “His gear is busted!”

“Don’t draw attention to him!” Oluo hissed, flapping his hands frantically.

“What’s happening?” Marco asked.

“Ugh, dammit! Come on!” Jean wrestled with his belt, which wasn’t coming off. Sweat dripped down his forehead in nervousness. “Work with me here!” As he struggled, loud footsteps came behind him. The Titan that had left before had come back, walking up to Jean.

“Jean! Look out!” Marco flew around the Titan, teeth grit in determination.

Gunther let out a bark of laughter. “Well, slap my ass and call me a Wall priest,” he said. *He’s good*. The smile faded off his face. *Was.* Was *good*. He glanced over his shoulder, and the furrow between his brows deepened.

The boy was sitting ramrod-straight, with a pallor on his face better seen on bloated corpses lying face-down in canals. He also saw, to his gratification, that he wasn't the only one who'd noticed; Jean's eyes were fixed more on his friend in the present than his actions on the screen, and Sasha and Connie's gazes kept jumping back and forth between the two.

Bertolt, too, seemed to have noticed; he kept turning around to steal glances, lips pursed so tightly Gunther half-feared he would suck them clean off his face. As he watched, Reiner gripped Bertolt's shoulder, face a sickly shade somewhere between yellow and green. His stomach twisted.

They're going to have to watch him die, he thought. It wasn't a guess—far from it, in fact. *They're going to have to watch him die, and they're going to know there's nothing they can do about it. Worse—* he grimaced, *—what if there* was *something they could do about it?* He wet his lips.

Eld nudged him with his shoulder. "Hey, you good?"

Gunther laughed again, bitterly. "No," he said. "But better than them, at least."

"Marco, what the hell are you doing?" Marco ran in the other direction, leading the Titan away from Jean. Jean managed to get the gear off the soldier, wrenching it from the corpse.

Jean couldn't help grimacing. "What?" asked Connie.

"Nothing," Jean muttered, pushing down the prickling feeling crawling over his skin. The dead man's eyes seemed to stare at him out of the screen, even after the image shifted and he couldn't see him anymore. He watched himself scrambling into the stolen gear and nearly laughed aloud. *Seriously?* This *is what I'm hung up on?*

It was stupid, he knew; if anything the other soldier would have *wanted* him to take the gear. He'd heard horror stories about war, and about soldiers who got trapped beyond the Walls; gear was far from the worst thing to take from a fallen comrade. Still, the part of him that had been raised to be respectful, that still clung onto the notion of 'noble battles,' that had shut its eyes and hummed a little tune while he fought for his life, recoiled at the idea of robbing the dead—if you could call it that. *Get over yourself*. He clenched his fists tighter, nails digging into the rough material of his pants. *Idiot*.

"Crap, why do you have to go and be the hero?" Connie shouted, running across the roof. Jean launched his gear, flying towards the Titan. He cried out when his gear malfunctioned, sending him toppling to the ground.

"Man, you've got to be kidding me! Why's the trigger so stiff?" He trembled, staring at the trigger in horror. He looked over as the Titan came closer and closer towards him.

"Cou—" Armin's jaw snapped shut before the words could make their way out. *Could that be why he died?* Mikasa shot him a questioning look and he shook his head. *Maybe he fell. Or maybe he fell and* then *his gear broke*. The thought was sudden, and very nearly unbidden. *No one knows* how *we die*, he thought. *They just know we do*.

We.

A few days ago, it would have been *they*.

"Jean!" Connie yelled as he jumped off the roof and towards the Titan. He missed the nape completely, instead smacking right into the Titan's forehead, landing gracelessly on the roof. The Titan in question touched its forehead, as if it had felt the pain from the impact.

"*How*?" Ymir demanded.

"I didn't see you helping!"

"Are you insane?"

"What are you waiting for? Get out of there!" He dodged a swipe from the Titan as he spoke. Jean turned and began running. He barely missed a chomp from the Titan, who rushed towards him. Jean looked ahead, seeing an upside-down Titan's face, mouth wide open. The screen was tinted blue as things moved in slow motion.

"Oh, sweet fuck!" Oluo nearly tumbled out of his seat.

"Walls, I'd have pissed myself," breathed Gunther, hand pressed tightly over his chest; he could feel his heart pounding beneath his ribs, through the thin skin of his breast.

Jean's head spun. Fritz above, he felt nauseous. He barely remembered that happening; it had, at the moment, been just another splotch on his day that had faded into the miasma of horror he'd spent the last weeks doing his best to forget (hardly an option anymore, he supposed drily). And it certainly hadn't been as slow as he was seeing it now. How far away had he been from death? A foot, a second, a spare breath taken at the wrong time?

I would have died. The thought found him oddly calm, without a trace of panic. *If I'd been alone, I would have died*. His hands were even folded in his lap, for shit's sake.

(He didn't let himself think about how it would have felt, whether he would have felt it, or whether he'd have just drowned in the cave of red, like that girl Eren had watched sink into her own blood just before he changed.

He didn't let himself think about how, if he *really* wanted to know, all he'd have to do was ask.)

Annie came down on the Titan's chin, forcing its mouth shut as Jean got out of the way. Jean and the others flew over the roofs, making their way to the wall.

"Annie?"

Her jaw spasmed and she dug her fingers into her thigh. "What?"

"You weren't with their squad." Reiner's tone was ripe with confusion. On his other side, Bertolt let his eyes squeeze shut. Annie swore silently.

"I was passing by." There was no wrath in her tone, none of the simmering rage and envy bubbling beneath the surface. Bertolt's eyes blinked open again and he glanced at her. She could barely keep the snarl from her voice when she bit out the next words. "I thought I'd help out."

"Do you idiots have a death wish?"

“Don’t even start!”

“Yeah! You scared the hell out of me!”

Annie said nothing, looking over across the town. “I’ll be damned” she said breathlessly. The others looked over, eyes wide.

Here we go. Hange shifted forwards, eyes gleaming behind their spectacles. Mike leaned back slowly, a tension that almost looked painful etched into every line of his body. Even his arms, which had been draped easily across the back of his couch, were still as though they’d been carved from stone; had anyone touched him, they would have felt his muscles quivering beneath his skin.

Levi leaned forwards near-imperceptibly, elbows digging into his knees. *Well?* he narrowed his eyes as a low rumble began to shudder its way out of the speakers. *What exactly does everyone think you’re worth, brat?*

Mikasa was snapped out of her thoughts, hearing loud footsteps. The rest of Mitabi’s team looked over at the source of the sound. They saw the boulder, making its way over to the gate. Beneath it, was Eren, steaming erupting from his Titan body. His green eyes glowed fiercely, his face was smashed into his shoulder as he carried the large boulder over his head.

Gunther whistled, long and low.

“Eren. . .” Mikasa watched with a smile, tears in her eyes.

Hange dragged in a breath so large and so long that, for a moment, it looked as though they would burst. “Well?” asked Levi.

The air burst from them like water from a split skin in form of a screech that rattled the windows. Eld swore, hands flying to his ears. Moblit’s pencil barely faltered. “Look at that *steam*!”

“Bathhouses could never,” Mike deadpanned.

Hange ignored them. “It’s not just his strength!” they exclaimed, flapping their arms excitedly. “Well, no. It is. But it isn’t!” Their hands landed on their hips, then flew to their hair, then to the floor. “He’s healing!” they said, slapping the carpet. “Look, see? But he’s not injured! Externally, he’s not injured.” They snatched their glasses off their face, then jammed then back on and shoved them to their forehead. “Well, internally. But that’s the point! He’s crushing himself, but he’s healing before—”

Erwin inhaled sharply. “He’s using his own body weight to compensate for his strength,” he realized.

“Everything or nothing,” Hange agreed, nodding fervently.

“That effort,” said Erwin. “It’s—”

“Exponential?” Hange’s fingers were wiggling hard enough that they looked almost as if they would grown hands of their own just to clap them together, too. “Maybe! Who knows? I will!”

Mike huffed. “Like rolling a carriage on top of people instead of wheels,” he said. “Think there’s a limit?”

Levi shrugged. “Faster than a mule, ‘s all I can say.”

“Mikasa!” Armin came rushing in.

“Armin!”

“He came out of it somehow! He’s determined to see the mission through the end! As long as we’ve got his back while he heads for the Wall, victory will be ours!”

It still took too long. Eren uncurled his fists. *The others never took this long*. His lip curled as he watched the red marks fade from his palms before his very eyes. *Trial and error*, he groused to himself. *Trial and a* lot *of error. Lots of error with some spare trial thrown in. What the hell*. He glanced sidelong at Armin. *Even—*

He blinked and looked back at his palms. They were pale and still before him, unaffected by the shudder than had run through him. Even the heels of his fingers were smooth, unmarked by the callouses he’d cultivated through the years. *What?*

“Defend him!” Mitabi yelled, eyes shadowed and wide. “To the last man, if that’s what it comes to! Eren must reach the gate! I don’t want a single Titan near him!”

“It looks like we’re back on!” yelled Jean. “Focus on keeping Eren safe!”

“The both of you, go! I want you with Eren immediately!” Ian ordered Mikasa and Armin. “Hop to it, soldiers! That’s an order!”

“Yes, sir!”

They can follow orders. The thought shouldn’t have come as as much of a surprise as it did. *Bright-eyed and bushy-tailed*, thought Levi. *Well. Bushy-tailed, at least. But not stupid.* He watched the images flash by on screen critically. *Not cogs, either*.

Ian ran over, noticing soldiers on the ground. “Team Mitabi! What are you doing!”

“Those ugly sons of bitches have lost all interest in us!” he replied. “We need to get close enough to grab their attention!”

“Hey, big guy! Over here!”

“You’re walking away? Maybe you want us to shove our blades right up your smelly asses?”

“Weakness two,” Connie whispered under his breath.

Sasha shrugged mock-carelessly. “If it works,” she said, but she was fighting back a snicker, too.

The Titans turned back, glaring at them. Mitabi’s eyes were wide in fear, as the Titans started to come towards them.

“It worked! We’ve got two of them!”

“Run! Make a beeline for the buildings!”

“They’re insane! Setting foot down there is suicide!” Armin said. “If they get cornered somewhere, there’s nothing they can do!”

“Yeah, I know! Let’s move out!” Ian ordered, jumping off the building, “Everyone, follow team Mitabi!”

“Come on, Armin, we need to go!” Mikasa said. They followed suit, running towards the others.

“Over here, come get me!” Ian yelled at a Titan, who brought its hand down, trying to crush him.

The *slam* of the giant’s hand seemed to echo through the room. Ymir jerked, tightening her own fist instinctively.

Eren continued to walk forward, more steam erupting from his body.

I feel like. . . I’m about to buckle under the weight. . .* Eren thought. He looked down, seeing Mikasa and Armin running around. *Mikasa. Armin. What are you doing? Get to the rooftops! You’ll be killed!

“Hey, what’s the matter? You can’t catch me?” a soldier yelled, before he was caught in a Titan’s grasp.

Jean’s head hit the back of the couch with an exhale that almost sounded like a growl. Petra muttered a short prayer beneath her breath and Oluo took a swig of juice, biting back a cough when it hit the back of his chest like a fist.

“You never will with that attitude. . .” Mitabi said, before he was crushed by debris.

Krista bit her tongue against the aborted scream. Ymir’s scoff was barely a brush of air against the shell of her ear. “Still pretending?”

She felt like she’d been cut though the gut. “What?”

“What a fast—” Ymir’s hands tightened around hers, “—brave—” Krista clenched her jaw, “—*heroic* death.”

“*Death*,” Krista repeated though gritted teeth. “Can’t you show some respect?”

“For what?” The disdain in Ymir’s voice was audible. Krista could almost feel it leaching into the air around them. “Pictures on a screen? It’s everyone else that needs to calm down.”

“How are you like this?” Krista demanded. “How are you so—so *cold?* Don’t you even care?”

She almost regretted the words as soon as they were out of her mouth. Almost. Ymir’s gaze hardened into shards of flint, or steel. “Of course I do.” Her voice was like ice. “That’s why I don’t give a shit about this.” *I know the past*, her eyes said. *I know my mistakes*. Krista had to bite her lip to keep from shouting *I don’t!* back at her.

“No! Dammit!”

***“Why, why throw caution to the wind and go outside, Eren?”* Armin’s voice came to him in his thoughts, as he carried the boulder.**

We’re born free, all of us,* Eren thought, as various Titans grabbed at the soldiers on the ground. A girl was lifted towards a Titan’s mouth as she screamed in fear. *Free!* He thought back to the men who kidnapped Mikasa. *Some don’t believe it, some try to take it

away. To hell with them! **He thought back to the first time Armin told him of the outside world.** ***Water like fire, mountains of ice! The whole bit. Lay your eyes on that and you'll know what freedom is! That's worth fighting for!***

Does it have to be? Sasha pursed her lips. *Why can't freedom be home? Why should I leave to find it?* Her father had given her a pair of bracers before she'd left for basic training; they were of the only things she had left that she hadn't traded away.

Her forest was gone. Her horses were sold. *Why can't freedom be going back?*

Little Armin smiled at little Eren, who returned it, eyes glowing in awe. ***Fight to live! Risk it all for even a glimmer of real freedom!*** **A soldier was brought into a Titan's mouth, his screams ringing out through the area. Armin and Mikasa ran ahead of Eren, determination clear on their faces.**

Bertolt nearly burst out laughing. *What freedom? Barbed wire? Armbands? Curfew and papers like we're prisoners? Like we're animals?* His mouth filled with wet, burning heat; he'd bitten through his cheek. *Just stay down, Eren*. He felt, all of a sudden, very tired. *We're doing you a favour*.

It doesn't matter what's waiting outside the gate or what comes in! **Ian held a Titan's mouth open, throwing another soldier out. Mikasa's eyes widened as the Titan grabbed Ian, pushing him between its teeth.**

Ian. Ian, who had stared at him with wariness instead of suspicion. Ian, who had yelled at him to hurry up. Ian, who had teased Mikasa. Eren felt sick. "You didn't tell me," he said, surprising even himself with how quiet he was.

Mikasa moved as if to touch him, then stopped. "You didn't ask."

It doesn't matter how cruel the world can be! Or how unjust! Fight! Fight! **Mikasa forced herself to look away, focusing on the mission.** ***Fight! Fight!*** **Connie barely missed being stomped on by a Titan. Marco stood on a rooftop, looking over his shoulder.**

Behind? Jean almost made to turn and take a look for himself, but stopped just in time. *What was he looking at?* "What were you looking at?"

Marco shook his head with what looked like the effort a man would need to push a dead bull up a hill. "Don't know," he forced out. "Don't remember."

"Ah, there's still one ahead of us!" Armin shouted.

"I'll take care of it!" Mikasa said, running towards the Titan. Before she could make it there, Rico flew in from the side, swords raised.

"Get out of the way!" She screamed as she cut out its eye. Mikasa attached her wires to its nape, spinning herself around. She jumped, driving her blades through the nape with a battle cry.

"She's good!" Connie exclaimed.

"You sound surprised," said Mike.

"I just —" Connie shook his head. "Never mind, it's stupid. I just thought, well. . . she'd be a good Scout, wouldn't she?"

The smile on Mike's face was somewhere between grim and amused. "It's not a life for everyone," he said, sounding almost gentle. "Just 'cause you have a sword, doesn't mean you're ready for going beyond the Walls."

Eren made it to the gate, sunlight shining through. Armin grit his teeth, tears in his eyes.

"Go!" he screamed as Eren cried out, slamming the boulder into the hole.

Erwin let out the breath he hadn't realized he'd been holding and leaned back in his seat. "Well?" asked Levi in an undertone.

Erwin let his eyes flicker shut for the briefest of moments. "He's not there yet." Levi huffed.

"A rookie could take him out, you mean. This is what you expect me to work with?"

"This is all we *have* to work with." Erwin straightened and Levi crossed his arms. "He did it, though. You can't deny that."

Levi scoffed, but rolled his eyes in concertation. "He's not a match for those other big freaks. Still isn't."

"You've been training him?"

"Of course I have. What do you think I've been doing, picking my ass for a month? The kid's a disaster, Erwin."

"He'll have to do."

"That's bullshit, and you know it."

"What other choices do we have?" Levi didn't respond. "If everything goes to plan," he pressed, lowering his voice, "he won't even get the chance to see combat—"

"More combat."

"More combat. All you'll have to do is keep him safe."

Levi exhaled and turned away. "Guess we won't have to guess, at least," he drawled, tilting his head at the screen.

***Fight!* Steam settled around them as the soldiers watched in shock, at the first time mankind had achieved victory against the Titans. Rico fell to her knees, tears in her eyes.**

It doesn't feel like a victory. Sasha swallowed forcefully and wet her lips. *I—we should be happy, shouldn't we?* She glanced around the room. Nobody was cheering. *Of course not. This already happened. We've already celebrated*. She looked down. *Bigger picture*, she reminded herself. *Bigger picture. It's all of us*.

"Comrades. Your sacrifices weren't in vain," she said, as she shot off a smoke signal. "We have made history! This day belongs to humanity!"

"Definitely yellow smoke, sir!" Anka said, voice quieter in awe. "Oh, my god! The mission was a success!"

Mikasa took a deep breath, pressing her palms to her knees. She could feel the ridges of her bones beneath her thumbs, the shift of muscles through the skin of her palms, the pulse of blood through her fingers and her legs. It was grounding, in a way. *We survived*. Her fingers spasmed, clenching tighter. *That's it*.

(*He's family*, she'd told Ian.)

"Deploy all reinforcements!" Pixis ordered, "Bring the Elite squad home!"

Information Available for Public Disclosure

History of Fighting the Titans, Part 1

Based on the oldest records, the Titans first appeared 107 years ago. The Titans devoured most of the human race.

"It's almost perfect," said Connie suddenly. His eyes widened. "No, wait!" he exclaimed. "That's not what I meant! It's just—the timing, you know? A hundred years exactly? It's. . ." he trailed off. "Fitting. Something."

"Yeah, we get it," Jean muttered.

"Maybe it's a hundred for a reason," suggested Armin. "Maybe that's how long it took for the Colossal and Armoured Titans to develop?"

"You're talking like they're breeding them." Gunther grimaced. "Eugh. Titan breeding farm." Bertolt flinched.

History of Fighting the Titans, Part 2

Humans fought the Titans with cannons, but were helpless against their vitality.

Eren's Titan steamed as it began to disintegrate.

"Mind the stragglers! Ackerman, pull back!" Rico ordered.

"With all due respect, I'm not withdrawing until I recover Eren!" Mikasa said, running over to Eren.

"That's probably the one time I'd commend her for disobeying orders," said Eld. *What if he'd been eaten?* he wondered. *If he'd died—what would have changed?* He frowned. *Would it have even mattered?* Sure, he'd plugged the Wall, but what else? There were only so many convenient rocks he could carry, and, so far, the cons seemed to outweigh the benefits. Callous as it felt to admit it, he just couldn't see any rewards that outweighed the risks. *We almost killed him once*, he thought, stomach curling. *What if all of this is just a waste of lives?*

"Armin! How is he?"

"Unconscious and scorching to the touch!" he yelled back as he struggled to get the unconscious boy out of the nape. "There we go. Ugh! We need to get him up the Wall!"

"Why's it heat, do you think?" wondered Moblit.

"They don't move at night," said Gunther. "Maybe it has to do with sunlight?"

"Why would they be hot if they ran off sunlight?" interjected Oluo. "If that was the reason, they could just store the energy and keep moving at night. Then they'd be cold during the day and hot at night."

"Guns get hot when you keep firing them," said Petra thoughtfully, furrowing her brow. "Maybe it's like that? Like getting sweaty after a workout."

"But Titans don't sweat," said Oluo.

"Do you actually have any of your own ideas, or are you just here to be annoying?"

Armin tried to pull Eren out, but to no avail. "Uh-oh, dammit! He's fused to the carcass! I can't work him free!"

"Then we cut," Rico said, drawing her blades.

"Wait! We don't know what that might do!" Mikasa protested. Rico cut the flesh successfully, sending Eren and Armin tumbling to the ground.

Armin frowned. "How do you get out on your own?" he asked.

"Oh." Eren started. "Uh, I just kind of. . . pull, I guess." He jerked his arm backwards to demonstrate.

Armin's frown deepened. The ropes of sinew had been burnt through Eren's clothes and into his cheeks, fused as if they'd been there his whole life. "Doesn't that hurt?"

Eren hesitated. "I don't know," he said quickly, spotting Armin's discerning look. "It's—I don't remember, not really." It was a lie. He didn't think Armin bought it, but a new commotion arose on screen and his gaze was drawn away. Eren let out a small breath of relief.

A shadow loomed over them and Armin looked back to see two Titans behind them.

"Eren! Armin!" One of the Titan's reached out for the two, as Eren began to open his eyes.

Despite herself, Sasha gasped. *She's not going to make it!*

Before Mikasa could get there, Levi flew in like a flash of lightning. He quickly killed the two Titans before anyone could even blink, spinning around them. He landed on one of the corpses, not looking back at Eren and Armin.

Connie whistled beneath his breath. Hange slapped Levi's knee and he batted their hand away with a scowl.

He really is fast. Mikasa leaned forwards, tracking the blur that was the man as best she could. It was his swords, she remembered. She clenched her fists experimentally, turning her wrists. But, of course, that wasn't how they were meant to be held. She crooked her fingers empirically. *Does he get dizzy?* she wondered. *How does he stay balanced?*

"Mikasa?" The girl in question landed beside the boys.

"Who's that?"

Eren looked up, eyes half lidded in fatigue. Levi's cape fluttered in the wind, the symbol shining in the sun.

"The Wings of Freedom," Eren whispered. Levi looked back at the three.

“Pay attention, kiddos,” he said. “This is the part where you explain to me exactly what hell is going on.”

“Afterwards, thanks to the coordinated efforts of the Scout Regiment and the Garrison Regiment’s Corps of Engineers, Wall Rose stood once again as a bulwark against the Titan hordes.”

Ymir bit back a scoff. *It’s a rock propped up with sticks*, she thought, mouth twisting with disdain. *It’s like plugging a dam with a ball of cotton. Do you seriously think that’ll stop* them*?*

Cannons fired down at the Titans still inside the city. *“It was a full day’s work dispatching the Titans who remained corralled within Trost’s perimeter, during which the wall-mounted cannons fired ceaselessly. Most of the Titans nearest the wall were taken out by the explosives. The few that remained once the smoke cleared were summarily cut down by the Scout Regiment.”*

Two Titans were shown, tall and gangly, one with a mop of brown hair and another with a head of stringy brown locks, tied up and surrounded by soldiers. *“During the so-called cleanup operation, two Titans, a 4-meter and a 7-meter, were captured alive and successfully restrained.”*

A breathless wail eeked from between Hange’s teeth like water through a leaking pipe. Moblit sighed. Hange keened wordlessly, burying their face in their hands. “*Sawney*. . .” they groaned. “*Beane*!”

“They’re the dead ones, right?” Connie muttered. Jean grunted in affirmation.

Pixis stood atop the wall, overseeing the city. *“However, all told, 207 people were dead or missing and 897 were among the injured. So while the reclamation of Trost represented the first true victory for humanity in its fight against the Titans, too many soldiers had fallen for celebration to be in order.”*

Too right. There was a bitterness in Marco’s mouth, a sour wetness that fermented beneath his tongue and in the back of his throat, stabbing at the backs of his teeth like barbed coils of bile. His fingernails caught on the fibers of his jeans, tugging at his nailbeds almost painfully when he curled his fists. His stomach rolled and he let his head drop, dragging in a breath that threatened to choke him.

We haven’t even had the chance to—

To what?

The scene changed as soldiers went around, picking up the dead and identifying them. A cart wheeled by, carrying a pile of corpses.

Petra’s hands flew to her mouth, cutting off a strangled gasp. Oluo looked ill.

“Have you ever—?” She cut him off with a jerking shake of her head. He swallowed forcefully and shook his own head.

Never like this, Petra wanted to say. Fresh bodies? Absolutely. They didn't cart themselves home. She knew the feel of cold skin beneath her hands almost as well as she knew it warm, knew the weight of a body over her shoulders the way other people knew the weight of boxes and coats. She hadn't grown used to it, though; not that, never that. This, though. . .

She could see the miasma in the air, the smog of decay lingering around the peoples'—*childrens'*—forms.

At least skeletons didn't smell.

Jean walked around, a cloth wrapped around his mouth. He looked down at his gloved hands, before looking over to the side. His eyes widened in shock as he recognized the corpse. It was Marco.

Bertolt wrenched his head away from the screen, teeth sinking into his tongue to hold back a gag. His stomach rolled, and he could almost imagine the others could hear the pounding of his heart and the sick splash of the bile rising in his throat. How could they not?

Reiner's face was pale and drawn. Bertolt wanted to scream.

"Is—" He looked down, seeing half of Marco's body had been bitten off. "Is that. . . you, Marco?" His face was shown, eyes sunken in as the body began to decay.

Eren couldn't breathe, couldn't look away. *Marco's dead*. Such a simple statement, barely half a breath to say. *Marco's dead* meant mourning and silent tears. It meant a bonfire and quiet reverence. It meant walking on eggshells and lowered gazes.

This was none of that. He didn't want to sob, didn't want to cry; he wanted to scream and rage and throw himself at the ground again and again and again until he stopped moving himself. He wanted to tear at his face and hair and lose himself in the steam rising from his wounds, wanted to drown in his shame and his pain until he could forget those sightless eyes (sightless *eye*—singular) staring past him.

He wanted to do everything but turn around and look the other boy, whole and alive in every way but the one that mattered, in the eye.

Jean's hands shook, his eyes wide with horror. "If you have a name for this one, it'd be helpful to pass it along," a nurse said, holding a clipboard.

"I wondered where he was, but he's. . ." Jean didn't seem to notice the nurse was even there, too caught up in his own grief. "He's not the sort of guy who'd—you know. Marco. . . what happened?" Jean looked around, denial catching up to him. "No. Somebody saw it. Had to have! Somebody knows how he went out!"

Annie could barely breathe for how tight her jaw was clenched. The breath of an aborted laugh slid from her nose like broken glass, cutting her lips, her jaw, as it slid to rest in the shaking hollow of her chest. *I sure did*.

"I need his name. We don't have time for this," The nurse said, her own eyes were wide and unseeing, telling of the horrors she had seen identifying the bodies. "Please, son. You understand? It's been two days since we bored up the hole in Wall Rose. That's too long,

we're nowhere near accounting for all the dead. Unless these poor souls are dealt with soon, an epidemic is going to break out. We're the first line of defence against secondary disaster. We'll lament the fallen after we've done our jobs. Is that understood?" Jean stared at her, before looking back at Marco.

This is your own fault for being so damn clever. Marco choked back a sob, hand flying to his throat.

"104th Cadet Corps, Captain of Squad 19," he said, voice oddly blank. "Marco Bodt."

"Bodt. Duly noted, then. Thank you, Cadet. I appreciate the help." She wrote on her clipboard, walking away. "Continue."

A clatter broke through the air like the blunt edge of a blade through a wall as Marco stumbled to his feet, legs banging into the side of the coffee table.

"Marco!" Sasha's shout was lost in the clatter of the burning man running up the stairs, and her echoing yell in the racket of the door slamming behind him.

He thinks he might have closed the door on his fingers. He thinks he doesn't care.

The back of his head hit the wall with a *thud* that would have had his skull throbbing and ears ringing any other day. The pain was a grounding force, one the stabbing agony in his gut and the slow, tearing inferno of his fingers scrabbling at the walls couldn't grant him.

I'm dead.

Oh, god, I'm dead*.*

I'm dead, and I was murdered, and they're out there, and I'm fucking dead.

His stomach turned and he fell to his knees, scrabbling at the toilet seat. A sharp stab shot through his finger as he chipped a nail against the porcelain but the pain barely registered. He grabbed the edges of the bowl and heaved, throat and mouth burning as he vomited.

Faintly, as if from a thousand miles away, through the sound of splattering and choking, he heard a slam, and a noise that might have been a name. A hand touched his shoulder and—

Grappling with him, pinning him down, fingers digging into his flesh, the crack of leather as she tore away his gear, oh, Rose, *he knew them he loved them he'd* trusted *them—*

He heaved again, squeezing his eyes shut. The hand was still on him, a thumb rubbing the junction of his neck and shoulder, tracing soothing circles, and he let out a wet, spluttering wail.

He coughed, and spit out the last bits of bile. "Water," he choked out.

"Yeah." The hand moved away, and Marco almost sobbed at the absence. The tap of leather boots against tile, the whisper of hinges and quiet thud of a cabinet door. A moment of fumbling and quiet curses, then the squeak of a faucet.

"Here." Something cool touched his cheek, and he fumbled for the glass. The water was almost too cold against his dry lips, like tossing a bucket of ice into a fire and watching the

sparks and steam fly. He washed it around in his mouth, gargled, then spit it into the toilet with a grimace. Another sip, slowly, so slowly, and he swallowed carefully.

Sprained, sore, crawling away, dragging *himself* gogogo*, massive fingers wrapping around his torso and picking him up, dangling like a ragdoll, teeth like rotted tombstones pressing against his skull, heat rising through a throat like a tunnel from a stomach of bloodandbonesandacidandbloodandfleshandbonesand* painpainpainpainpain *and*—

"Woah!" He'd dropped the glass. There were two warm, strong hands on his shoulders, solid and firm, and water spreading across the floor, pooling around his boots and seeping into the seat of his pants. "Hey, hey. Just breathe, alright? It's fine. Breathe." He reached up, grabbing blindly, and his hands found two sturdy, wiry wrists. "Talk to me, Marco."

We haven't even had the chance to talk.

He dropped his head with a groan, forehead resting against a shoulder. "They take our memories," he muttered.

There was a moment of hesitation, then he felt two hands pressing against his shoulderblades. "What?"

"They take our memories," Marco repeated. "The branches. They—" He let out a short, hysterical laugh. "Goddesses, it sounds ridiculous," he said. "They take what doesn't affect our—" his voice caught, "—our *storylines*. I remember my childhood. I remember growing up. I remember cadets. I remember—" he traced the thick, rough material beneath his fingers, the bumps and ridges of the sigil stamped onto his back, the shape of his shoulders. "I remember you. Eren, Armin, Sasha, all of you. I don't remember leaving the storehouse. I don't remember what happened after Daz freaked out. I don't remember my squad splitting away. I don't remember my comrades dying." His hand shook, and the arms around him tightened. "I don't remember dying," he whispered. "It's the trauma. They take what they can, do what they can to help us, to ease us through it. It's supposed to come back slowly, so we can process it and—" A snort bubbled up and he burst into tiny, uncontrollable giggles. "*Heal*."

Silence. A faltering, jerking motion, and then there was a hand in his hair, cradling him close like something small and precious. "Most of the time, we don't get the chance to see our own dead bodies," said Marco. A short, dry laugh. "Lucky me."

"Are you—"

"No."

"Okay."

His hands stayed where they were, tracing the pattern of the threads in his sweater and playing with his hair, teasing and wrapping curls around his fingers. Marco closed his eyes and pressed his face against his shoulder, breathing in the familiar scent of smoke and grass and the ashy soap they used to clean the uniforms.

He'd have stayed there forever, if he could. But the shock was beginning to wear off, and he could feel the bruises forming on his knees, the blood pooling in his nailbed, the flakes of broken glass beneath his feet, the sodden denim clinging to his skin.

"I have to go," he whispered. The arms tightened around him.

"No, you don't."

"I do," he insisted.

"Don't."

He squeezed his eyes shut tighter, as if that would help. As if he couldn't see their faces in the dark behind his eyes, couldn't hear their voices. As if that would bring him back to life.

He reached up, taking one of Jean's hands in his and bringing it over the left side of his chest.

He kept his eyes closed, face buried firmly in his shoulder. He didn't think he'd be able to bear it if he saw his reaction.

"See?" He felt Jean's hand clench, fingers spasming, grasping for something that wasn't there. Would never be there again. "It's not real, Jean," Marco whispered. "None of this—none of *us*—are real. *I'm* not real." He could hear the beat of Jean's pulse, feel the warmth pouring off of him like a furnace. "Not real enough." He was still warm, too, just a bit. But still, he felt so cold.

Jean's other hand tightened around him. "So why does it hurt so much?"

He let his hand slip off Jean's wrist. Jean's arm jerked in an aborted motion and fell limply to his side. "I can't stay here," said Marco.

Jean's hands moved to grip his shoulders and he pulled away, looking him squarely in the eye. "What happened to you, Marco?" he asked.

He smiled weakly and got to his feet. "See you," he said.

And then he was gone.

The scene changed to a large, red blob on the street. Sasha and some others stood around in. Inside the blob were corpses upon corpses of the fallen.

Jean slid back into his seat, fists clenched at his sides. Sasha turned to him quickly, grateful for an excuse to look away from the screen. "Marco?" she asked quietly. Jean shook his head. "Where is he?" she pressed.

"Don't know."

"Wha—okay, *how* is he?"

"I don't *know*," Jean bit out. "Not good. Bad. Better. I don't know."

"Did—" She glanced at the stairs. "Is he coming ba—"

Jean's fingers spasmed in his hair. "I don't *know*!" He dropped his hands into his lap and squeezed his eyes tightly shut. A long, slow breath quavered its way from his throat. "I don't know," he muttered. "I don't—no." He shook his head. "I don't think so."

“W—What is this thing?” Sasha asked, voice hushed in horror.

“Leftover Titan vomit,” another soldier answered, holding a knife. The blob was shown closer, a corpse inside, face frozen in time. “Apparently, they don’t have a digestive tract, so once they’ve had their fill of people, they upchuck them like hairballs.”

“Then what the hell do they eat for?” Gunther bit out.

“Bastards,” Oluo spat.

“That’s sick.”

“Ugh, so gross. Can’t even make out a face.”

Annie stood over a corpse, eyes wide in horror.

“I’m sorry.” She whispered. “I’m sorry. . . I—”

“Contrition does them no good,” Reiner said. “What they need is a proper burial.”

A fire burned, flickering on the screen as it faded to another scene. A torch flickered inside a brick building. Eren opened his eyes with a gasp. His vision blurred, before it focused on two figures in front of him. Captain Levi and Commander Erwin stood in front of him, separated by bars.

“They locked him up?” Connie muttered.

“Of course they did,” Ymir snapped. “What, you thought they’d just let him swan back off into the sunset?”

“I—” Connie recoiled from her barbed tone. “Well, no, but— Hey, what’s your deal?” Ymir sneered.

“Ask stupid questions, get honest answers,” she said, teeth clenched hard enough to break. “Why, what’s yours?”

“Any questions?” Erwin asked the confused and fearful boy.

Straight to the point. Mike snorted. “Plenty, I’d guess.”

***That’s Commander Erwin, the head of the Scout Regiment’s task force. What’s he doing here? And Captain Levi?* he thought. “I, uh. . . where—where am I?”**

“Was he unconscious the whole time?” asked Hange. Levi grunted an affirmation and they nodded slowly. “Fascinating.”

“I think it’s obvious,” said Erwin. “Let’s just call it a dungeon. You’re currently in the custody of the Military Police.” Two Policemen stood to the side against the walls, straight-backed and stiff, rifles slung over their shoulders, looking for all the world like they couldn’t hear a word of what was going on.

“Only two?”

“What, you wish they’d put more?”

“No, ‘course not!” Sasha shook her head. “Just seems lax of them, you know? I mean, they’re not even wearing gear. None of them are.”

Connie shrugged. “They’re underground; maybe that’s why.”

“We were granted permission to see you only just now.” Eren looked down at his hands, which were chained up.

“Even in bed?” muttered Gunther. He couldn’t decide whether it felt like overkill or not enough. *Two guns and some chains against a Titan?* he thought. *Not close, no cigar. Against a kid, though?* He grimaced. *Shit. And I thought things were fucked up before*.

Erwin held up Eren’s key.

“Where’d you get that key?”

“Off of you. Don’t worry, you’ll get it back,” Erwin answered. “Let’s talk home. More specifically, the good doctor's cellar back in Shinganshina. Pretty big secret in there, right? About the Titans?”

“Yeah, I think so. That’s what my dad told me, anyways.” Eren replied.

“Shouldn’t there be more copies of the key?” asked Armin suddenly. “If it’s that important, I mean. Just to be on the safe side, at least?” Mike and Erwin exchanged a look.

“We. . . didn’t think about that,” confessed Moblit, looking baffled. “We di—we should do that, when we get back.”

“Could I have the key, Eren?” asked Erwin. “So we don’t forget.”

Eren nodded, then faltered. Erwin raised an eyebrow. “I—” Eren blinked. “How about later?” he asked. “We’re going to be here for a bit, aren’t we? I just—it would be easier to do it later, right?”

Levi narrowed his eyes. “He wasn’t asking.”

“Levi.” Erwin looked at him and he retreated. “That’s fine,” he told Eren. “Just make sure to remember.”

“Yeah.” Eren nodded quickly. “Of course.” He didn’t let out the breath he’d been holding until the Commander turned away.

He pressed a hand to his shirt. The key dug into his clavicle like a blade against his chest, and he could almost imagine it burning a hole through his skin. *You’re being ridiculous*, he chastised himself. The sudden, intense possessiveness that had crawled over him at the thought of taking the key from his neck had been a shock; even more so had been the strike of resentment towards Armin for suggesting it.

“It must suck having your dad and your memory missing in action at the same time,” drawled Levi. “Unless, of course, that’s just a cover story.”

“Enough,” said Erwin. “We’ve been over this already, we know he has no reason to lie. And that’s all we know. How about you shed a little light on things for me by telling us your intentions?”

“My what? What do you mean?”

“Here’s the lay of the land,” said Erwin. “If we want to pay your father’s cellar a visit, we have to venture back into Shinganshina.”

Oluo dragged in a sharp breath. It had only just hit him how ridiculous the whole concept was. *Going all the way back to Shinganshina? Risking it all, throwing away who knows how many lives, based on. . . based on what? A kid's fever dream? Some freaky Titan inheritance?* A prickle of doubt niggled at his core. *What if there's nothing in the basement? What if there* is *something in the basement? What if it's bad?* He glanced at the couches next to him. *Captain*, he thought, *what the hell are we supposed to be doing?*

A replay of the Armoured crashing through the gate was played. "Sealing the breach there. as we did in Trost, would be the smart way to go about it, don't you think? Naturally, we'll need your special powers."

"Seal it with what, though?" asked Reiner, leaning forwards. Bertolt jumped and Annie's fists tightened. Her fingers had, at this point, nearly fused with her palms. "It's not like there'll just be another massive rock there."

Eren stiffened. Annie shifted forwards slightly. "Not—" he hesitated. "Not big enough," he said, as if the words physically pained him. "But—our house, the rock that hit it. . ." He swallowed forcefully.

"Debris!" Armin interjected. "There was plenty around there, and we could. . . well, we have time to figure that out, don't we?" He glanced around nervously.

"Of course." Erwin glanced between the blondes.

"More than one way to skin a cat, right?" said Levi.

"Anyway you slice it, a Titan's deciding our fate. It's been conjectured that the Colossal and the Armoured Titan are more or less the same as you. It's why I ask your intentions. They could be the key to turning the tide forever. You could save us." He held up the key again, it glimmered in the faint light of the dungeon. Eren looked down, his chains clinking as he moved.

Reiner wet his lips. *You're groping blind*, he thought. *Rocks and debris? Give me a break. He can't even walk without a human crutch*.

"I don't know what I am." He thought back to his dad promising him to show him what's in the basement. He thought back to happy memories of his family before the fall. He thought back to his mother being eaten.

Flashes of his dad holding a needle mixed in with the memories of his mom's death.

Hange held back a groan behind their teeth. *Walls, what I'd give to get my hands on one of those*. . .

"*No, this is over! I'm going to put a stop to this!"* Multiple memories flashed through his mind rapidly.

"Come on," said Levi impatiently. "It's an easy question, so answer it. What the hell is it you want to do?" Eren was breathing heavily as he looked up, teeth grit and eyes wide.

"I want to become a member of the Scouts and slaughter every Titan that crosses my path!"

Despite himself, Jean couldn't help but grin sardonically. *There he is*.

Levi's eyes narrowed at his answer. "Huh, well played." He walked towards the bars. "All right, then. Erwin, I'll take responsibility for him. Let the higher ups know what's going on." He wrapped a hand around a bar and leaned forwards. "Not that I implicitly trust him, of course." He tilted his head. "It's more of a matter of me trusting myself to deal with him. I'll kill him If I have to." Eren gasped quietly and shifted back, chains jangling.

Mikasa's lips thinned. *Not if I have anything to say about it*.

Levi carried on as if he hadn't noticed. "The bigwigs are likely to raise a stink. My record more than speaks for itself, I'm sure. Good news, Jaeger." His eyes glimmered sardonically. "You're now officially a member of Scouts." The boy stared at him, and the screen turned black.

Light, bouncy piano music tinkled through the hallway's hidden speakers. A *beep* cut through the jaunty tune. "*Paging Sheril Grey*," droned the falsely cheerful automated voice. "*Paging Sheril Grey. Riley Evinemo to Sheril Grey, requesting urgent backup in Turbo-B4Z Wing. Sheril Grey to Room 9. Any available Level 4 personnel and above to Turbo-B4Z Wing. Situation status: concern. Personnel with recent exposure to paradoxes advised against involvement. Any available Level 4 personnel and above to Turbo-B4Z Wi—*"

Marco sighed and hit the button on the wall. "Marco Bodt, Level 5, Floor 6 current." He grimaced at the sound of his own voice; grating and rough, yet somehow wet at the same time. He rubbed at his red eyes, despite the fact that there was no one else in the hall to see, and the camera in the corner hadn't been working for three weeks. "Requesting time frame?"

"*Apologies*," the automated voice chirped. "*Personnel currently attached to revision projects are requested to stay with their delegations. Please return to your assigned viewing room immediately*."

"No," said Marco, "I'm not with a delegation! I wasn't supposed to be there."

"*Apologies*," the automated voice repeated. "*Personnel currently attached to revision projects are requested to stay with their delegations. Please return to your assi—*"

"I don't *have* a delegation!" Marco shouted. "I was—Walls' sake, it was the Bob thing! I'm done, now I'm out, I—oh, for Sina's— Marco Bodt, requesting early relievement?"

"*Situation?*"

Marco bit back the sob threatening to well back up. "Conflict of interest," he forced out.

"*Is review necessary?*"

He laughed bitterly. "No."

The panel swung open with a cheerful *ding*! "*Please input your personnel code and record your time signature to the closest approximation*." He sighed and crouched down to peer at the tiny keypad. "*The Branch would like to remind personnel that all paperwork is filed through a third-party—*"

A weight collided with him and, caught off guard, he was thrown to the ground. He tensed instinctively, hands flying up to either side of his face, and, for a moment, all he could smell was fire, feel hot red tile beneath him, screams and blood and *weight pushing him down arms pinned behind his back,* get his gear*, teeth and heat and red and—*

"Are you alright?"

He forced himself to relax. "Yes." He lowered his arms stiffly and pried his eyes open. The figure leaned over him took a quick step back and he stood up, brushing the dust from the seat of his pants. "I'm sorry."

"No, don't be." The other man shook his head, holding up a placating hand. "It's my fault."

There was a familiar undertone to the light rumble of his accent and Marco cocked his head with a frown. "Sorry, have we—"

The stranger shifted before Marco could catch more than a glimpse of dull green eyes. "Do you mind?" he asked, taking a step forward. "Just—" his hand brushed Marco's and Marco stumbled to a stop in the hallway. "Marco?" He turned. "I thought you left," said Eren with a frown.

"I—" Marco blinked and turned around. Pale blue wallpaper, dark brown panelling, and a poster with a looming red Titan. He flinched back before he could help himself and Eren reached out, taking his arm. "Hey! Are you—"

There was a paper crumpled tightly in Marco's fist. He unballed it, carefully easing out the wrinkles, and stared down at the empty page. "I think this is for you," he said, stepping away.

The frown didn't leave Eren's face, but at least it wasn't directed at him anymore. The letters on the page had been carved with an inexperienced hand, etched in curves instead of straight strikes, and marked with shaking, hesitating corners. But, still, the single word was too familiar to deny.

Eren.